

A Tale of Two Sites: Cellphones, participatory video and indigeneity in community-based research
Une histoire, deux endroits : téléphones cellulaires, vidéo participatif et indigénéité dans un contexte de recherche communautaire

Joshua Schwab-Cartas and Claudia Mitchell

Volume 49, Number 3, Fall 2014

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1033549ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1033549ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Education, McGill University

ISSN

1916-0666 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Schwab-Cartas, J. & Mitchell, C. (2014). A Tale of Two Sites: Cellphones, participatory video and indigeneity in community-based research. *McGill Journal of Education / Revue des sciences de l'éducation de McGill*, 49(3), 603–620. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1033549ar>

Article abstract

This polyvocal text is both a narrative and a dialogue between two scholar-activist researchers working in rural communities in distinct parts of the world — South Africa and Southern Mexico — sharing their experiences of using cellular phone and camcorders, while also exploring the potential sustainability of these technologies in the context of rural communities engaging with participatory video projects. These communities are not only playing an increasingly salient role as the mediators of this technology, but through their practices they are drawing much needed attention to the ways in which the researcher — participant dynamic in participatory video practices can be transformed into a more autonomous and participant-led set of practices. The article considers the ways these media forms carry the potential to imagine and honour different worldviews.

A TALE OF TWO SITES: CELLPHONES, PARTICIPATORY VIDEO AND INDIGENEITY IN COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH

JOSHUA SCHWAB-CARTAS & CLAUDIA MITCHELL *McGill University*

ABSTRACT. This polyvocal text is both a narrative and a dialogue between two scholar-activist researchers working in rural communities in distinct parts of the world – South Africa and Southern Mexico – sharing their experiences of using cellular phone and camcorders, while also exploring the potential sustainability of these technologies in the context of rural communities engaging with participatory video projects. These communities are not only playing an increasingly salient role as the mediators of this technology, but through their practices they are drawing much needed attention to the ways in which the researcher – participant dynamic in participatory video practices can be transformed into a more autonomous and participant-led set of practices. The article considers the ways these media forms carry the potential to imagine and honour different worldviews.

UNE HISTOIRE, DEUX ENDROITS : TÉLÉPHONES CELLULAIRES, VIDÉO PARTICIPATIF ET INDIGÉNÉITÉ DANS UN CONTEXTE DE RECHERCHE COMMUNAUTAIRE

RÉSUMÉ. Ce texte plurivoque est à la fois un récit et un dialogue entre deux chercheurs universitaires activistes œuvrant au sein de communautés rurales situées dans deux parties distinctes du monde – l’Afrique du Sud et le sud du Mexique. Ils partagent leur expérience d’utilisateurs de téléphones cellulaires et de caméscopes, tout en explorant le potentiel de viabilité de ces technologies dans le contexte de communautés rurales engagées dans la réalisation de projets de vidéos participatifs. Non seulement ces communautés jouent-elles un rôle de plus en plus important comme médiateurs de ces technologies, mais elles attirent par leurs pratiques une attention indispensable sur les manières dont la dynamique existant entre chercheurs et participants dans des pratiques de vidéos participatifs peut être transformée par des règles plus autonomes et établies par les participants. Cet article s’intéresse aux manières dont ces médias ont le potentiel de représenter et mettre en valeur diverses visions du monde.

The use of participatory visual research through video cameras and cellphones is altering the ways in which communities might choose to represent themselves and their own concerns about what is important. Indeed, as is highlighted in recent publications about participatory visual methodologies (see Milne, Mitchell & de Lange, 2012; Mitchell, 2011), this is particularly the case in relation to marginalized communities who have typically been the “objects” (if noticed at all) in social research. Moreover, the relatively easy access to video equipment has in some cases changed the relationship between the researcher and the researched, and as we explore here has sometimes cut out the researcher role completely to the point where DIY (do-it-yourself) practices typically associated with an urban youth participatory cultures movement can just as likely be found in communities in rural South Africa or Mexico. In this article, we write as two researchers invested in community-based research through participatory visual methodologies such as photovoice, digital storytelling, and, as we describe here, participatory video. Over the past two decades, participatory video research (PVR) has become an increasingly popular approach to engaging communities, and has been used amongst a variety of groups including media activists, visual researchers, arts-based researchers, and community-based researchers. It has also become an important method used in various disciplines within academia and can be understood as a conscious attempt by researchers to not only address discourses and practices of dominance, but also explore the critical nexus between academia and activism. One of the principle aims of PVR is to use the process of media production to empower people in order to engender social change through research (Milne, Mitchell & de Lange, 2012; Mitchell, 2011; Pink, 2013; Yang, 2012), allowing the researcher and his / her research to have a tangible effect upon the community with whom they are collaborating.

We frame our work within Sudbury and Okazawa-Rey’s (2009) idea of activist scholarship, which they defined as “the production of knowledge and pedagogical practices through active engagements with, and *in service of* [emphasis added], progressive social movements” (p. 3). They drew attention to the compatibility of a broad range of community-based approaches that could be used within an activist agenda, something that is echoed by Flood, Martin and Drehner (2013), who wrote about combining academia and activism: “the increasing emphasis on ‘community engagement’ or ‘outreach’ across the university sector provides a valuable means to legitimate activist work, as well as opportunities to shift institutional expectations” (p. 22). We are interested in furthering this work through a consideration of Indigenous activist scholarship (Zavala, 2013), particularly as highlighted in Josh’s work in his own community in Mexico. At the same time, and building on the reflexive nature of working with participatory video (see Yang, 2012), we seize the platform of a research article to engage in a complex blending of both different perspectives / standpoints and self-reflexivity about our work with participatory video, and, in so

doing, set up a critical dialogue of sorts. What can we learn as we engage in this “tale of two sites”? How are digital platforms central to this work? What are some of the tensions, particularly in relation to what counts as activism in this work? In the first section Claudia reflects on her work with cellphones in rural South Africa, focusing on one cellfilm, *Village Gathering*. In the second section of the article, we offer Josh’s account from his work as an “insider” using participatory video in his grandfather’s village in Mexico. We then go on to consider some of the implications of this work for research in two key areas of social research informed by culture, tradition, and intergenerationality: (1) youth and sexuality in the age of AIDS in South Africa, and (2) language revitalization in Mexico. In a final section, we highlight the ways in which the digital opens up a space for new audiences and how this might link to activism.

A TALE FROM RURAL SOUTH AFRICA: CLAUDIA’S ACCOUNT

...cellfilms made with a cellphone for a cellphone...

(Dockney & Tomaselli, 2009)

I am not quite sure what it is about Nikiwe’s cellfilm about butchering a sheep – *Village Family Gathering* – or why it has become something about which I feel compelled to write. To understand it fully you would have to start back several months before Nikiwe produces her cellfilm, back to the time that I am holidaying in Iceland with my three adult daughters, and where we take turns filming our travels together using a cellphone. Perhaps it is more about me than it is about my daughters when it comes to being obsessed with Denzin’s (2003) idea of the cinematic interview: “tell me about why you are wearing what you are wearing today,” “what do you think of the food?”, or “we are three days into the trip – what do you really think?” It is amusing (or so I think), and at the end of our trip we have a delightful and humorous (and occasionally serious) “selfie” account of our days together. While we are all busy also capturing our trip through digital cameras, it is the presence of the cellphone that offers the “on site” reflexive eye. The experience of creating the cellfilm on our Icelandic trip lands squarely back in the middle of a research project using cellphones that I had initiated with several colleagues in South Africa, working with two groups of rural teachers, one group of six (including Nikiwe) from Eastern Cape and another group of twelve from KwaZulu-Natal. The teachers had already been working in small groups to produce cellfilms on the topic of what they saw as they challenges and solutions to addressing such issues as HIV and AIDS and poverty in their communities. (Mitchell & de Lange, 2013a; Mitchell, de Lange, & Moletsane, 2014). However, almost overnight the ubiquitous cellphone as a tool for group representation in a research project on HIV and AIDS reinvents itself as a tool for self-representation, and the next time that I meet with the teachers following my trip to Iceland, I tell them a little bit about family filming and reflexivity. What I mostly highlight is the idea of using the cellphone – and the skills that we had learned together

about cellfilm production – in our everyday lives, and an invitation is issued to the teachers to share whatever cellfilms they come up with the next time we meet. They term it their “homework,” and many arrive back at our next workshop 6 weeks later with a whole collection of their own cellfilms. While two of the teachers use their cellphones to document their school environment, most of the cellfilms go right to family with titles such as, *Kimberley Nerwande*, *Lindi’s Family Christmas Party*, *Julia’s Home Video*, *My Beloveth Kids*, and *Village Family Gathering*. It is Nikiwe’s cellfilm, *Village Family Gathering*, that totally captures my attention – perhaps because it feels less staged and, indeed, is perhaps a perfect “insider” film of what is more typically seen as the work of an outsider documentary filmmaker. It is a four and a half minute production, filmed at a rural homestead or *kraal* as it is called. Her carefully filmed segment depicts a group of male relatives and friends just outside the main house cutting up a sheep that has been just slaughtered. It is late winter in the Eastern Cape and there is not a lot of colour in the background. There is no real sound track in the film except for banter, a steady “Q and A” of what is happening and why, occasional comment by one of the men speaking in Xhosa, and sporadic outbursts of laughter and camaraderie. It is not just the filming of the ritual that we get through the back and forth banter, but a deep local history of the ritual and especially a sense of the patriarchal structures in place:

Participant 1: For the boys’ ration, you set the brains aside even if you put them in a tin, but you set them aside.

Participant 2: Yes! That’s how I know it too.

Participant 3: No, here you cook the sheep’s head with its own brains then you’ll be given the brains and eat them.

Participant 1: Oh! No! They are penny-pinching! That means one cannot even share one half of the sheep’s head with women!

Participant 2: No, women don’t get anything! The head belongs to men, all of it.

Participant 3: That’s why it is said it’s the “men’s head.”

With a steady hand and an alert eye, Nikiwe takes us through the process of the butchering, step by step – especially the preparation of the sheep brains – occasionally panning to the wide open landscape and then to close up shots of someone’s 4 X 4 or brand new BMW, all haphazardly parked in the *kraal*. We are aware of Nikiwe’s voice from time to time, though there is no sense that the men are performing, and even the finale depiction of one of the men putting the sheep’s head on his own head seems somehow natural – and that it is just what they would do even if there was no camera. There is also something haunting about the juxtaposition in just one short film of both the ultra-modern world as signaled by the very modern (and expensive) vehicles and of course Nikiwe’s filming using her cellphone, and the traditional world of the village gathering, all capped by the “men’s head” humour at the film’s end.

A TALE FROM MEXICO: JOSH'S ACCOUNT

Ni chigueeda guixí ne huidxe láninga' cayunidu' nagasi.
[The future is what we make of it today.]

(Zapotec proverb)

This is a story I often tell and retell because it is through its retelling that I continue to learn more about our ancestral Isthmus Zapotec traditions and further develop my relationship to our traditions and ancestral practices. Through this story I have also come to reflect on my particular understanding of participatory video and the potential role technology can play in our community's struggle to preserve, promote, and strengthen both our language and culture amongst our younger generations.

“¡Queso! *Guetazee'*, *totopos*, *totopos*, ¡*guetabiza!* [cheese, fresh corn tamale, Zapotec tortillas, blackbean tamale]”: these are the common terms heard at the central market in my maternal grandfather's village of Union Hidalgo, a relatively small Indigenous Binnizá (Zapoteco) community located in the Southern Mexican state of Oaxaca near the Pacific Ocean. It is in the central market in our community where my story begins. The smells of cacao and fresh cheese perfume the air, the sound of women's laughter can be heard as they tell each other stories in Zapotec; all the while people weave through the stalls looking for ingredients for tomorrow's meal, or youth stroll through getting ready for a late night meal – what is typically referred to as *cena*. That night our media collective, Binni Cubi, as part of our community cinema night, was projecting in the central market a documentary entitled *Ramo de Fuego* [Blossoms of Fire], which focuses on Isthmus Zapotec women's practices, such as embroidery for traditional regalia and gastronomical practices, but also critically explores the complex gender relations in our communities. It also attempts to dispel constructed notions that our communities are matriarchal. We choose to screen this documentary because we thought it would be fitting to show in the marketplace, a space that is almost wholly dominated by women.

After the screening of *Ramo de Fuego*, an 83-year-old elder named Na Modesta Vicente approached us to thank us for projecting the film, but wondered why we did not screen anything about our own community's traditions, to which we replied that unfortunately we still didn't have our own documentary nor did we know of any videos on these food practices to show to the community. Na Modesta then expressed her interest in making a film with us that documents her recipe for *guetabiza* or blackbean tamale. She told us that she was getting older and wasn't sure how long she would be able to continue her practice. She felt it would be important to leave something not only to the town but also for her young granddaughter, who bears her name. This moment would mark the beginning of our Zapotec media collective's second documentary, entitled *Na Modesta*.

For our collective, the main aim of making this documentary was twofold: first we felt our community needed an archival record of these ancestral practices for future generations to experience and be able to watch, so they could learn from it since our community is experiencing an alarming decline of these practices, particularly amongst our younger generations. Second, the film was much more than just an archival record for future generations — our collective saw the film as an opportunity for our community to celebrate the fact that in spite of colonization and subsequent attempts at cultural assimilation, as Zapotec people we have successfully retained our way of life. Like us, Na Modesta understood the documentary to be both a reaffirmation and celebration of our local customs — a video record of her recipe for future generations — but there was more to it for her than we could have understood at the time. That is to say, it was not until commencing the process of filming Na Modesta preparing the *guetabiza* that our collective could fully appreciate her actual goal.

Making guetabiza and capturing it on video

The day before filming, our collective went to visit Na Modesta to discuss the documentary in detail in terms of the interview questions we had in mind. In addition to this, we were attempting to understand the actual process and the steps involved in the preparation of *guetabiza* in order to anticipate a possible storyline and shots we might want to focus on. We also asked her when she wanted us to come by to film the process of her making the tamales. To our surprise, she insisted we come by later that evening. I recall being confused as to why Na Modesta would expect us there so late and thinking the lighting would be difficult for capturing anything on film. As I was leaving my house my uncle asked me where I was going with a camera in hand and what I was filming. I told him that we were making a film of Na Modesta making *guetabiza* and about my confusion as to why she would want us there so late. This was followed by laughter from my uncle, who realized how unfamiliar I was with the process of making that kind of tamale. He said that it is a very labour intensive dish to prepare, something that cannot be made the same day like the other tamales, which is why, he said, not many people make *guetabiza* anymore, noting that Na Modesta is one of the few people in Union who still takes the time to make this dish.

Later that evening, we meet Na Modesta and almost immediately upon arrival she got some of us to collect some firewood as she was rinsing off the corn to prepare to cook it. She asked us to bring the firewood to the clay oven, located outside of her house in a wooden shed beside the *cebia* tree. As we entered the space, there was a faint smell of dried corn-husks or *bacuela* as Na Modesta would later tell us. With the smell of burning wood in the air and the crackling of the fire in the background, Na Modesta began to tell us stories or *ní nizaacaa* — personal stories about her childhood, about our community and how much it has changed since she was young, about the person

who taught her to make this dish, and about why she continues to make it. In many ways, she was continuing what once was so natural to everyone in our community before the introduction of television and the internet. According to my *bixoze-bixozebida* [great grandfather], the practice of telling stories at night, not only as a form of entertainment, but as a way to pass down values, practices, and beliefs about our Zapotec lifeways, was once an everyday phenomenon. For me, this is a practice I know well from being with my elders, including my great grandfather, who would on many occasions ask us to sit under our mango tree so he could tell us stories about Union, his experiences in the cornfields, or jokes just to make us laugh. But now, even in my own family, this practice of storytelling is no longer as natural, especially after the recent passing of my great grandfather.

The next morning Na Modesta wanted all of us to meet her before sunrise – many of our elders still believe that we should always welcome the sun every morning as a way to show our gratitude for everything it continues to give, such as the corn that sustains us – to watch her wash the corn and go to the *molinero* [the grinder] to process the corn into *cuuba* [dough]. Upon returning with the *cuuba* in hand, Na Modesta began the process of making the *guetabiza*. As she began to prepare all the ingredients for the dish, she slowly began naming the ingredients of her dish in Zapotec: “gui’ ña, sidi, cuuba, bitiaa, zá, bizaá.” She insisted everyone repeat them and try to commit them to memory. Besides reciting the ingredients in Zapotec, she also encouraged those of us who were not filming to taste the *masa*, feel it and mix it, as she told us about the process itself. While she was grinding the beans, *chile* and *epazote* on the upright pestle and mortar, she asked us to gather around her closely as not to miss anything, and I can recall the smells of the ingredients and the sound of the grinding of the ingredients between the pestle and mortar.

Eventually, Na Modesta encouraged us to try grinding some of the ingredients ourselves to feel the weight of pestle and mortar. Though this request seemed trivial, we experienced it as a rupture of the barriers we had assumed were structuring our project: we were playing the role of the ones documenting, sitting behind the camera, passively watching and recording (and tasting of course!), and she was in the role of the expert in her craft, putting on this display for us to capture for posterity. I remember being taken aback by Na Modesta’s request. I must also admit I was, oddly enough, quite apprehensive to even try, thinking I might not be doing it right (and on camera), and of course I wouldn’t do it right because I had never done it before. But that was Na Modesta’s point. It was curious to note that many of the younger members took to this invitation much faster than older members like myself. But I did finally try placing the tamales into the *Zuquii* (clay oven). Na Modesta wanted us to feel the heat of the oven that had been burning since the night before and also wanted to illustrate that there was a certain technique to placing the tamales without burning yourself or the tamales.

The experience of helping with the tamales reminded me not only of stories my grandmother had told me about her childhood, working with her mother as they used this clay oven to make *totopos* and cook meat, but in an odd way, I felt it brought me closer to really understanding their experience of cooking and preparing our traditional foods both on a physical level and psychological level. At that moment, I felt more connected to them, to my grandmother, as well as to my ancestral lifeways. Moreover, throughout this process, Na Modesta also invited us to ask as many questions as we liked about what we were experiencing and seeing. Someone asked, “how do you know when the tamales are done?” “Do you time it?” She illustrated her answer by showing us that she places an *epazote* leaf on top of the lid of the oven and once that leaf is fully dry, you know your tamales are done. She even got us to smell and touch the *epazote* leaf right before she took them out to get us to understand all of the steps involved in the process of making *guetabiza*. Once the tamales were cooked, Na Modesta took them out of the *zuquii* and immediately offered them to us to taste and experience what it was to have a fresh *guetabiza* — something that many of our elders would have experienced as children.

Upon finishing the filming process, our entire collective then reviewed our footage to make sure we had captured the process in its entirety as well as to see if we needed more b-roll (extra footage captured to enrich the story you’re telling and to give you greater flexibility when editing) to fill out the documentary. As we continued to review the footage, we came across a seemingly insignificant phrase uttered by Na Modesta: “I have taught you my recipe; now you can make it yourselves.” It was then that we understood her — Na Modesta was transmitting her knowledge to us through practice, through the *doing* in the same way that her mother passed it on to her and her mother before her. In learning to make this ancient food through participating in its production, we had become part of the continuum of our culture, part of its survival over millennia. It was an astounding insight from such a seemingly mundane experience.

APPLYING NIKIWE’S AND NA MODESTA’S INSIGHTS TO PARTICIPATORY VISUAL RESEARCH: INDIGENEITY AND DIGITAL MEDIA

Indigenous people...take changes in their way of life, such as technology, and shape them to their own values, purposes, enjoyment, always aware that the past continues to be ever-present.

(Masayeva, 2000, p. 232)

What are we to make of these two “sights” of Nikiwe and Na Modesta? How might we examine these digital pieces in the context of indigeneity?

CLAUDIA: It wasn’t until Nikiwe and the other teachers screened their individual cellfilms that I began to fully realize the potential of working with what might be regarded as a local technology — the ubiquitous cellphone — as

a multi-modal tool for self-representation. When I first proposed to a funding agency the idea of working with cellphones with teachers in rural communities in South Africa and in the context of high rates of HIV & AIDS, I think I was enamored with the idea of the low cost technology of the cellphone (as opposed to using video cameras) in participatory visual research. I was also taken with the potential for ownership through “cellphone to cellphone” dissemination, both issues that had long concerned our research team in our work with participatory video (de Lange & Mitchell, 2012). Typically in our work in rural South Africa, a school or community would not have a DVD player or an LCD projector and so could rarely screen the videos that they had produced after the research team left. When this equipment was purchased for a school, there were new issues of custody and access. The cellphone looked like it would be the answer to addressing many of these issues. Though I included in the research proposal a rationale for a project that referred to indigeneity, I don’t think I had fully imagined what that would look like, or what the use of a technology would be when it was not the research team bringing in video cameras, but rather coming to work with a technology that was already there. In fact, there was a humorous exchange in the very first workshop with the teachers when we, the research team, pitched up with our relatively low tech Nokia XO1 cellphones purchased for the project, and the teachers themselves took out their high-tech Blackberries and iPhones. They wondered aloud if they “had to” use the Nokias, and it is worth noting that Nikiwe’s *Village Family Gathering*, so beautifully filmed, came from one of these high-tech phones. At the same time, there is also something slightly unsettling to a research team about not bringing anything new. Technology itself, its “bells and whistles,” can be part of the enticement for participation and perhaps a type of colonization in itself as I reflect in my fieldnotes after our first cellphilm workshop:

Our car is loaded with technology: a couple of laptops, an LCD projector, various wires and cords – and a collection of Nokia cellphones purchased for the workshop. It is the cellphones we now worry about... will the teachers think the whole thing bizarre? Why would they want to spend a day playing with cellphones anyway, especially as it turns out that cellphones are banned in the school – at least for the learners? Video cameras look, well, interesting; we would be bringing something new. But what do we do after an opening line that goes something like, “good morning. How many of you have a cellphone? What do you normally use your cellphone for? And have you ever produced a cellphilm?” (Excerpt from Project Fieldnotes, March 21, 2012; Mitchell, de Lange & Moletsane, 2014)

The real point of the local is that it is “there” or comes from somewhere else but is adapted to and by the local. This is exactly the context for cellphones, something that is highlighted by De Buidjin, Nyamjoh and Brinkman’s (2009) in *Mobile Phones: The New Talking Drums of Everyday Africa* and by Powell’s (2012) *Me and My Cellphone*. There are many meanings that we could attach to *Village Family Gathering* with none of them explicitly linked to anything

to do with HIV and AIDS or poverty (the focus of our research study) but yet significant to the project overall. On the one hand, it is Nikiwe, a woman from the community, who is capturing all of this on her cellphone, and there is something noteworthy about her own agency in a context of patriarchy and the idea of the “men’s head” as reminder of the deep rootedness of gender inequalities. At the same time, she captures through her cellphone issues such as the following, which are all attached to the social realities of HIV and AIDS: mobility and migration (between the city and the country) since none of the men who are butchering or the filmmaker herself actually live near the homestead; wealth and access to material goods (what do these material goods mean as the BMW makes its way towards the homestead, past rural schools, small *rondavels* or local huts, people walking along the side of the road – women carrying babies on their backs in the traditional style and baskets and other goods on their heads?); and the ritual slaughter and butchering of the sheep as part of tradition and patriarchal culture. As noted above, we learn that the sheep brains are kept aside for boys and men to eat, but we also learn in the back and forth “Q and A” that there is an officially designated term, *ntlabi*, for the person (typically a man) appointed by the family to stab the animal. This happens before the animal is properly slaughtered. Relebohile Moletsane (2011) reminds us of the dangers of idealizing tradition and the past in contemporary South Africa. Speaking of what she describes as cultural nostalgia, she writes: “considerations of the role of culture, particularly traditional cultural practices as one of the drivers of the spiraling rates of HIV infections, remain paramount in the minds of those concerned with efforts aimed at addressing the HIV and AIDS pandemic in South Africa” (p. 39).

I would argue that Nikiwe’s cellphone captures data that is typically absent in PVR where participants are given specific prompts such as representing “challenges and solutions to addressing HIV and AIDS,” or “feeling safe.” Although there is a great deal to be gained from what we have described elsewhere as “digital retreats” with teachers (Mitchell & de Lange, 2013a) who work with designated prompts, we need to be reminded of the impositions of our own pedagogy, and simultaneously, the strength of Nikiwe’s strong documentary vision of a community ritual and what it might represent in terms of local culture and as captured through local technology. It is this recognition that is, for me, the activism of this work. In a study that our research team carried out a few years earlier on teachers in the age of AIDS (Higher Education AIDS, 2010), we found that many teachers in deeply rural areas of KwaZulu-Natal, Eastern Cape province and Limpopo identified local beliefs in witchcraft as possibly the greatest barrier to addressing HIV and AIDS and HIV-related stigma. In another study a group of women teachers in a focus group revealed their own beliefs in a discussion of the links between witchcraft and gender violence and HIV (Higher Education AIDS, 2010). However, the issue of traditional beliefs is conspicuously absent from educational discourses of teacher education,

life skills, and the management of HIV and AIDS in schools even though a number of anthropologists and health researchers highlight the significance of local knowledge in addressing HIV and AIDS in relation to such practices as virginity testing (LeClerc-Madlala, 2001; Marcus, 2008; Scorgie, 2006), non medicalized male circumcision (Meissner & Buvo, 2007; Vincent, 2008), and the “sugar daddy” phenomenon (Hunter, 2010). *Village Family Gathering* and its mode of production invite us to reflect anew on the place of local knowledge.

JOSH: This experience and methodology gifted to me by Na Modesta has now become a fundamental part of my doctoral research, which explores how information and communication technologies such as cellphone video can be used as a culturally adaptable means to ensure the transfer and preservation of language and local practices. PVR, when combined with “on hand” local technology such as cellphones and social media, can be an effective and a powerful tool in providing people with a new channel for self-representation, which can create “spaces for diverse experiences, perspectives, and stories to be shared” (Tabodondung, 2010, p. 130). Also PVR methodology as in our experience with *Na Modesta*, demonstrates PVR to be a useful research tool. However, it could be argued that the main objective of participatory video communication is not to produce media materials per se, but to use a process of media production to empower people with the confidence, skills and information they need to tackle their own issues (Shaw & Robertson, 1997). In other words, as a methodology, it emphasizes the process, rather than the final product, through workshops and social interaction while also viewing video or cellphilm as a pretext for engaging community participants, specifically youth. Moreover, participatory video processes are meant to encourage community members to take action and work collectively on local issues, something that was very much our experience working with video and *Na Modesta*. Such processes can also provide a space for people to discuss issues that are rarely addressed or spoken about out in the open (Lunch & Lunch, 2006). In many ways our goal, as mentioned earlier, was meant to be celebratory and to have a document for future generations.

The screening of our film did undoubtedly create a space for the community to discuss and think of many important issues such as language loss, rapidly changing traditions, and increasing rates of Type 2 diabetes due to non-traditional diet (Schwab-Cartas, 2012). Critical reflection and discussion is undeniably an integral aspect to our project, something that it shares with PVR. At the same time, critical reflection and discussion alone will not ensure the continuity of our Zapotec way of life, and it appears that in PVR this seems to be the final “destination” of the process. *Na Modesta* taught us that learning through doing and cultural continuity transcend technologies like video or cellphilm, such that they are not ends in themselves, but merely tools in a larger process of learning. In this case, the appropriation of video was used to continue to foster the intergenerational transmission of ancestral knowledge.

In other words, as much as PVR may have in common with our experience, there are also many differences between a PVR approach and a “Na Modesta” approach. What I am referring to is sustaining the workshop element that is an important step in the PVR process but is not the central concern, while in Na Modesta’s approach it clearly was. Her approach takes as its central concern the *learning through doing*, or the workshop aspect of engaging its participants in a multisensory and embodied experience, which was sustained so that the embodied moment where theory and practice were collapsed could impress traditional knowledge onto its participants. In essence then, video allows one to explore non-visual forms of knowledge through practice-forms of experience that are not exclusively visual, nor are they “general and abstract, but as embodied in social, cultural and material contexts” (Cazden et al 1996, p. 82), engaging language learning within the lived context in which language acquisition occurs. Furthermore, by perpetuating this workshop element that combined digital technology and the ancestral practice of making *guetabiza*, Na Modesta managed to bridge the generational gap between the filmmakers as Zapotec youth firmly planted in 21st century digital culture and herself, an elder of a previous generation. This work created a space where we could not only learn from one another but also, through sharing a focus on audiovisual documentation of an ancestral practice, come together to understand each other’s distinct generational experiences. Na Modesta also taught us that it is not only okay, but critical to fully engage with this new technology because it has become a fundamental part of our world as Zapotec youth, but not at the expense of our own traditions. She also taught us something about activism. In many ways activism in our community is not thought of in dichotomous terms where only a specific individual or group of people are doing something to achieve change or fighting to preserve our traditional way of life. Rather, everyone in our community is trying to fight in different capacities to preserve our Zapotec traditions and knowledge, whether it is an elder passing on a recipe or a child on the street greeting his or her friend in Zapotec. Moreover, the term activism does not encapsulate the length of our struggle; it tends to imply that we just started to campaign or fight for these issues when, in reality, we have been fighting to perpetuate our Zapotec way of life since the Spanish arrived on our shores. Although our collective did not consider this work with Na Modesta as a form of activism, but part of the everyday reality of community life and of trying to find ways to serve our community and perpetuate the continuity of our Zapotec ways of life in this postcolonial world, clearly Na Modesta’s observations sparked many questions about what counts as activism in the context of Indigenous communities.

DIGITAL DIALOGUE THROUGH AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT

But how are the various audiences for the two videos also part of polyvocality in the sense that there is room for many voices, and how can this dialogue

be advanced through the platform of the *McGill Journal of Education / Revue des sciences de l'éducation de McGill* as an online journal and especially in this issue focusing on digital technology and scholarship? Positioning ourselves somewhat on the edge of these stories, as we hint at earlier, and yet aware of their impact on other audiences, we share below some observations about the screenings of these two productions and provide the links to films: *Village Family Gathering*: (<http://participatorycultureslab.com/village-family-gathering/>) and *Na Modesta* (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TFICQgID1TM>). Seizing on (and where possible facilitating) such opportunities, we propose, is central to a scholar activist role.

CLAUDIA: When Nikiwe screens *Village Family Gathering* for the other teachers (the original audience), no one quite knows what it is going to happen, and Nikiwe doesn't mention how long the film actually is. The audience is quiet and at the same time appreciative, especially in relation to Nikiwe's careful filming since the technicalities of cellphilmimg have been a feature of our workshops. The group bursts into laughter at the end, though, when they see the "butcher" put the sheep's head on his own head. Nikiwe's artfulness works, and the film itself sets off more discussion about the local contexts which participants could film in order to showcase their own social environments. Indeed at one point someone makes the comment that cellphilmimg should be a compulsory activity for staff members at the beginning of each new school year.

However, it is with some trepidation, or what MacEntee (in press) following Boler and Zembylas (2003) explores as a pedagogy of discomfort that I screen the film outside of rural South Africa and at a conference of poets and arts-based researchers in urban Montreal. This opens up new questions about audience and the ways in the issue of ownership. How will *Village Family Gathering* travel and should we have first consulted Nikiwe about screening the video in Montreal? My colleague Naydene and I worry that the filming of the butchering of a goat will be offensive to the group, although we ourselves see it as a perfect example of Louise Rosenblatt's (1978) work on the idea of the aesthetic response and the "living through" process in relation to the poetic (Mitchell & de Lange, 2013b). Interestingly, though, this urban Montreal audience includes several of our colleagues who are from KwaZulu-Natal. As they join in on the post-screening discussion, they wonder how they should interpret *Village Family Gathering* in this downtown Montreal setting and with an audience of people who know nothing of the setting, even if it is through the use of device that everyone recognizes (the cellphone)? Our worries are perhaps not necessary, and we enjoy the audience's response when they too get caught up in the scene of the butchered goat juxtaposed with the BMWs parked close by.

JOSH: The content of our film, which follows an 83-year-old elder, Na Modesta, making *guetabiza*, in many ways, is nothing out of the ordinary for anyone who is a member of our community. That is to say, in many ways, it depicts a brief snapshot of the everyday and an almost unremarkable activity. Yet this commonplace everyday activity became something rather remarkable when projected on a large screen in front of the community for several reasons. As mentioned earlier, it became a platform for our community to reflect on timely issues such as language loss and the effects of a new diet in the community. Coupled with the act of an elder graciously gifting our community an ancestral recipe passed in her family for generations, it forced people of all ages in our community to re-evaluate their own relationship with our Zapotec practices and compelled people in our community to ask themselves the question, what can be done to secure Zapotec culture for future generations?. In many ways, this film signified for many viewers in our community a celebration of both our resistance (Smith, 1999) and the continuity of our ancestral practices in spite of hundred years of oppression and marginalization. Perhaps most notable was the way the youth in our community responded to the film by asking their parents and elders to teach them more about our traditions and continuing this practice of making short films of these practices as they pertain to their own families. In other words youth are continuing to find ways to make these traditions not only relevant to them in the 21st century, but also exploring ways to use digital / new technology to both preserve and live our traditions.

When I screened our film in Montreal at several invited lectures, the reactions have always been very positive and have evoked a wide range of responses, ranging from simply wanting to know what the dish tasted like, to being surprised to hear that Mexico has a large population of Indigenous nations fighting to preserve their traditions and culture. Critically, it has opened up a dialogue and greater understanding between our Zapotec community and other Indigenous communities / viewers, especially in the Canadian context. More than anything the film is allowing us to not only see the similarities in our historical experiences and traditions in our communities but it also created a platform for us to share our experiences and the work we are doing in our communities in a way where we can support and continue to learn from one another.

CONCLUSIONS

In this article, we have used our experiences of participatory video in two country contexts as a way to offer what we hope is a nuanced understanding of the role of local technologies in local or Indigenous representation. While there are many advantages to using visual methods such as participatory video in social research, there are also problematics ranging from being too celebratory (Lowe, Rose, Salvio & Palacio, 2012), to issues of colonization in insisting on or expecting participation (Milne, 2012), and ownership (Miller & Smith,

2012). To date, however, there has been little discussion on the technology itself and the changing landscape of participatory research in the context of digital and social media, although Willett's (2009) work has been helpful in relation to offering a brief history of participatory video tools in terms of cost and functionality.

The account of Nikiwe's cellphone production of *Village Family Gathering* highlights this. At the same time, as can be seen in the account of the making of *Na Modesta*, perhaps its greatest strength is that it both mines the visual and also highlights that which cannot be visualized such as the transfer of ancestral knowledge only ascertained by physically engaging in the actual everyday practices of food preparation. *Na Modesta's* story also draws attention to how video and new technologies have not only come to form an important part of the everyday life of Indigenous Zapotec culture but are slowly becoming a fundamental part of how ancestral knowledge, practices, and stories can be transferred to the next generation. In other words, video, new technologies, and social media have already become an integral part of the next generation's Indigenous knowledge system. Our own small role in writing about these productions here is simply one of being "in service of" (Sudbury & Okazawa-Rey, 2009, p. 3) the fact that change is the one constant in history, and as Davis (2009) notes, all societies in all times and in all places constantly adapt to new possibilities for life. This underscores the need to recognize how communities with or without outside intervention are adapting technology for their own goals and for their own self-determination.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council for their financial support. We would also like to acknowledge Naydene de Lange and Relebohile Moletsane for their participation in the Digital Voices project.

REFERENCES

- Boler, M., & Zembylas, M. (2003). Discomforting truths: The emotional terrain of understanding difference. In P. Trifonas (Ed.), *Pedagogies of difference: Rethinking education for social change* (pp. 110-136). New York, NY: Routledge Falmer.
- Cazden, C., Cope, B., Cook, J., Fairclough, N., Gee, J., Kalantzis, M., ... Nakata, M. (1996). A pedagogy of multiliteracies: Designing social futures. *Harvard Education Review*, 1, 60-92.
- Davis, W. (2009). *The Wayfinders: Why ancient wisdom matters in the modern world*. Toronto, ON: House of Anansi Press.
- De Buidjin, M., Nyamjoh, F., & Brinkman, I. (2009). *Mobile phones: The new talking drums of everyday Africa*. Mankon, Cameroon: Langaa Research & Publishing CIG.
- de Lange, N., & Mitchell, C. (2012). Building sustainability into work with participatory video. In E.-J. Milne, C. Mitchell, & N. de Lange (Eds.), *The handbook of participatory video* (pp. 318-330). Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press.
- Denzin, N. K. (2003). The cinematic society and the reflexive interview. In J. Gubrium & J. Holstein (Eds.), *Postmodern interviewing* (pp. 141-155). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Dockney, J., & Tomaselli, K. (2009). Fit for the small(er) screen: Films, mobile TV and the new individual television experience. *Journal of African Cinema*, 1(1), 126-132.
- Flood, M., Martin, B., & Drehner, T. (2013). Combining academia and activism. *Australian University Review*, 55(1), 17-26.
- Higher Education AIDS (2010). *Piloting of HIV Module in Teacher Education Faculties in the Higher Education Institutions in South Africa. Report prepared for Higher Education South Africa HEAIDS Programme*. Pretoria, South Africa: HEAIDS.
- Hunter, M. (2010). *Love in the time of AIDS. Inequality, and gender, and rights in South Africa*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Leclerc-Madlala, S. (2001). Virginty testing: Managing sexuality in a maturing HIV / AIDS epidemic. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, 15(4), 533-552. doi:10.1525/maq.2001.15.4.53
- Lowe, B., Rose, C. B., Salvio, P. M., & Palacios, L. (2012). (Re)framing the scholarship on participatory video: From celebration to critical engagement. In E.-J. Milne, C. Mitchell, & N. de Lange (Eds.), *The handbook of participatory video*. (pp. 49-65). Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press.
- Lunch, N., & Lunch, C. (2006). *Insights into participatory video: A handbook for the field*. Oxford, UK: InsightShare.
- MacEntee, K. (in press). Discomfort to collaboration: Teachers showing cellfilms in a rural South African school. *Perspectives in Education*.
- Marcus, T. (2008). Virginty testing: A backward-looking response to sexual regulation in the HIV / AIDS crisis. In B. Carton, J. Laband & J. Sithole (Eds.), *Zulu identities: Being Zulu, past and present* (pp. 536-544). Scottsville, South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Masayeva, V. (2000). Indigenous experimentalism. In J. Lion (Ed.), *Magnetic north* (pp. 227-251). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Meissner, O., & Buvo, D. (2007). Traditional male circumcision in the Eastern Cape: Scourge or blessing? *South African Medical Journal*, 97(5), 371-373.
- Miller, E., & Smith, M. (2012). Dissemination and ownership of knowledge. In E.-J. Milne, C. Mitchell, & N. de Lange (Eds.), *The handbook of participatory video* (pp. 331-348). Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press.
- Milne, E.-J. (2012). Saying "no" to participatory video: Unraveling the complexities of (non) participation. In E.-J. Milne, C. Mitchell, & N. de Lange (Eds.), *The handbook of participatory video* (pp. 257-268). Lanham, MD: Altamira Press.
- Milne, E.-J., Mitchell, C., & de Lange, N. (Eds.). (2012). *The handbook of participatory video*. Lanham, MD: Altamira Press.
- Mitchell, C. (2011). *Doing visual research*. London, UK: Sage.
- Mitchell, C., & de Lange, N. (2013a). What can a teacher do with a cellphone? Using participatory visual research to speak back in addressing HIV & AIDS. *South African Journal of Education*, 33(4), 1-13.
- Mitchell, C., & de Lange, N. (2013, October). *Poetry in a pocket*. Paper presented at the Poetic inquiry conference, Montreal, QC.
- Mitchell, C., de Lange, N. & Moletsane, R. (2014). Me and my cellphone: Constructing change from the inside through cellfilms and participatory video in a rural community. *Area*. Advance online publication. doi: 10.1111/area.12142
- Moletsane, R. (2011). Culture, nostalgia and sexuality education in South Africa in the age of AIDS. In C. Mitchell, T. Strong-Wilson, K. Pithouse & S. Allnutt (Eds.), *Memory and pedagogy* (pp. 82-94). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Pink, S. (2013). *Doing visual ethnography* (3rd ed.). London, UK: Sage.
- Powell, C. (2012). *Me and my cellphone and other essays on technology in everyday life*. Mankon, Cameroon: Langa Research & Publishing CIG.

- Rosenblatt, L. (1978). *The reader, the text, the poem: The transactional theory of the literary work*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois Press.
- Schwab-Cartas, J. (2012). Learning from communities: Personal reflections from inside. In E.-J. Milne, C. Mitchell & N. de Lange (Eds.), *The handbook of participatory video* (pp. 383-396). Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press.
- Scorgie, F. (2006). A battle won? The prohibition of virginity testing in the Children's Bill. *Agenda*, 68, 19-28. Retrieved from <http://www.agenda.org.za>
- Shaw, J., & Robertson, C. (1997). *Participatory video: A practical guide to using video creatively in group development work*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Smith, L. T. (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies*. London, UK: Zed Books.
- Sudbury, J., & Okazawa-Rey, J. (2009). *Activist scholarship: Antiracism, feminism, and social change*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm.
- Tabodondung, R. (2010). Indigenous perspectives on globalization: Self-determination through autonomous media creation. In M. Blaser, R. de Costa, D. McGregor & W. D. Coleman (Eds.), *Indigenous peoples and autonomy: Insights for a global age* (pp 130-147). Vancouver, BC: UBC Press.
- Vincent, L. (2008). "Boys will be boys": Traditional Xhosa male circumcision, HIV and sexual socialisation in contemporary South Africa. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 10(5), 431-446. doi:10.1080/13691050701861447
- Willett, R. (2009). Always on: Camera phones, video production and identity. In D. Buckingham, and R. Willett (Eds.), *Video cultures: Media technology and everyday creativity* (pp. 210-229). Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Yang, K. (2012). Reflexivity, participation, and video. In E.-J. Milne, C. Mitchell, & N. de Lange (Eds.), *The handbook of participatory video* (pp. 100-114). Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press.
- Zavala, M. (2013). What do we mean by decolonizing research strategies? Lessons from decolonizing Indigenous research projects in New Zealand and Latin America. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 2(1), 55-71.

JOSHUA SCHWAB-CARTAS is currently completing a PhD in the Faculty of Education at McGill University. He holds a Master's in Art History from the University of British Columbia and has co-directed, directed, and produced five short documentaries focusing on various aspects of Zapotec community life. His doctoral research explores Indigenous language revitalization strategies through community-based video with *Diidxazá* (Zapotec) speakers.

CLAUDIA MITCHELL is a James McGill Professor in the Faculty of Education, McGill University and an Honorary Professor in the School of Education, University of KwaZulu-Natal. Her research cuts across several areas including visual and other participatory methodologies in relation to working with youth to address gender and sexuality, girlhood, teacher identity, and critical areas of international development linked to gender and HIV and AIDS. She is the co-founder and editor of *Girlhood Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*.

JOSHUA SCHWAB-CARTAS termine présentement un doctorat à l'Université McGill, au sein de la faculté des sciences de l'éducation. Il détient une maîtrise en histoire de l'art de l'University of British Columbia et a coréalisé, réalisé et produit cinq courts documentaires portant sur des dimensions variées de la communauté Zapotec. Son projet de recherche de doctorat explore les stratégies de revitalisation des langues indigènes par des vidéos réalisés avec des intervenants *Diidxazá* (Zapotec) au sein de leur communauté.

CLAUDIA MITCHELL est professeur James McGill et travaille au sein de la Faculté des sciences de l'éducation de l'Université McGill. Elle est aussi professeur honoraire à la Faculté d'éducation de l'University of KwaZulu-Natal. Ses recherches couvrent un éventail de champs d'intérêts incluant les méthodologies visuelles et les autres types de méthodologies participatives en lien avec le travail auprès des jeunes pour discuter de genre et de sexualité, de l'enfance chez les filles et d'identité enseignante. Elle s'intéresse également aux domaines critiques du développement international en lien avec le genre et le VIH / SIDA. Elle est la co-fondatrice et la rédactrice de la revue *Girlhood Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*.