



**VISUAL-PRIVILEGING:
SUBJECTIVITY IN COLLABORATIVE ETHNOGRAPHY**

FURTHER CONVERSATIONS WITH PAULA NICHÓ CÚMEZ

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This video presentation
([click here to view the video](#))
focuses on a series of five paintings
by Maya artist Paula Nichó Cúmez.

In *Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision*, Duran states, “In order to have a true integration of thought we must make room for nonlinear thinking, which will yield a true hybrid postcolonial way of expressing subjectivity. As we move into the next millennium, we should not be tolerant of the neocolonialism that runs unchecked through our knowledge-generating systems” (cited in Battiste, 2000, p. 101). Privileging text, as a form for investigation in qualitative inquiry is a knowledge-generating system marked by ethnographic colonialism and Eurocentrism. In this presentation of Paula’s work, we use video as a unique visual form and tool for qualitative inquiry. Through interviews and oratory, Paula describes her paintings. This investigation privileges the visual, thus moving visual inquiry from the margins into the mainstream.

Also privileged is Paula’s voice as the artist. Collaborative ethnography (Tedlock, 1991; Lassiter, 1998, 2005) takes place as I interview Paula and we discuss her paintings, their origins, the stories behind them, her beliefs and perspectives concerning family life, crossing borders, violations against humanity, nature and the role of women artists in Kaqchikel Maya society. The paintings become active places or visual sites that reveal insights both broad and deep. These visual narratives also act as signifiers of feminist perspectives in Maya cultures, which are contemplated by the artist.

When I wrote the article “Where Lived Experience Resides in Art Education: A Painting and Pedagogical Collaboration with Paula Nichó Cúmez” for the journal of *Visual Culture & Gender* (Staikidis, 2006), my research form relied on interviews and *conversations* (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). It was a written text that included quotations from dialogues and integrated reproductions of paintings as referents. Text was privileged. Although Paula described her paintings, I interpreted those descriptions by eliminating certain segments and choosing to include others. My perspectives as ethnographer and academic were constantly present as I edited her perspectives as artist and teacher. Collaborative ethnography took place as I sifted through our interviews, made decisions, came to conclusions, wrote them down, and brought the text back to Paula as we came to consensus about what to include or leave out. Nevertheless, the presentation was mine.

As I continued to read about the ethics of research and issues of representation, my discomfort grew: I spoke at conferences and wrote ar-

titles that reflected my perceptions of Paula's views. Although I referred to and acknowledged my own subjectivity as part of the research process (Behar, 1996; 2008; Desai, 2002; Ellis, 2004), that did not seem enough anymore. The question that continuously nagged at me was, "Whose discourse is privileged?" As I struggled with how to present this work justly in the academy, I realized that Luke Eric Lassiter (2005) was right—the gap between academically positioned and community-positioned narratives is essentially about the politics and power of representation; about who has the right to represent whom, about whose discourse is privileged. How might the presentation of this research respond to such issues of representation? I believe this video work is an answer to this call.

If research is a transformative act, having an impact on the researcher and the researched, as Sullivan (2006) notes, isn't the process surrounding the research and its presentation also transformative? Sullivan further observes that the purpose of research is the creation of new knowledge. Such observations connect with the research that is generated in the artist's studio, which transforms perspectives. Research as a process comes alive as the researcher grows—as the relationship between the collaborators develops and evolves. But, such observations also connect with the process of presenting research and representing others. It is not only within the space of the research that transformation takes place. It is also outside of the space of the research, and within the reflective process generated by the presentation of the research, that transformation takes place.

This self-reflective process has transformed the way that I present this work with Paula. This visual piece in 2008 is markedly different from the work presented and the form it took in 2006. I choose not to accept the limitations of a text-based format that weighted mine as the primary voice. The desire to change form to achieve more socially just ends pushed me to change the nature of the investigation and the structure of the research process itself. I sought to find better ways, more just ways, to create a forum for self-representation. So, we went to the paintings directly, which is what you see in the video, as well as Paula's own words to describe her paintings without interruption. What is the potential for a dialogue based on research using images as catalysts? And what potential exists for understanding between two artists, one an indigenous Maya

woman, the other, an outsider to indigenous cultures, when the tools of a common language such as painting are shared?

Obviously, such a process does not take place in a vacuum and is influenced by historical and contemporary discourse in the field of ethnography between indigenous scholars and non-indigenous scholars. Clearly, my representations of the life and work of Paula Nicho Cúmez are contested terrains. Soyini-Madison (2005) notes,

...with all the good intentions, excellent craftsmanship, and even with the reliability and eloquence of a particular story, representing Others is always going to be a complicated and contentious undertaking. These questions of ethics and representation arise again and again as I encounter ethnographic and qualitative projects. (p.4)

Such complications always arise from talking about people rather than allowing people to talk about themselves. Furthermore, as a non-Maya cultural outsider, artist, and ethnographer working with an indigenous artist in a "postcolonial" age, this research is riddled with issues connected to the destructive trail left by a traditional 20th century ethnography that cruelly objectified, misrepresented, and harmed indigenous cultures on a global level. For indigenous communities, the era of the postcolonial is a phantom. As Grande (2004) notes, "... the project of decolonization centers on issues of land, labor, resources, language, education and culture as they relate to issues of sovereignty and self-determination" (p. 153). In 2008, the issues Grande alludes to inform the content of all of Paula's paintings, which attempt to resist acculturation, preserve Maya traditions, and advocate for social justice. This reveals that decolonization as an enterprise is perhaps just beginning. As this research unfolds, I constantly go back to questioning what kind of re-presentation will direct the audience to Paula's perspectives *without interference*. Although, these video clips are edited in their sequence, I have attempted to leave Paula's words intact without too much interference.

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