

Michaelene Wright, book review, Erica Wortham, *Indigenous Media in Mexico AmeriQuests* 14.1 (2017)

Erica Cusi Wortham, *Indigenous Media in Mexico: Culture, Community, and the State*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press: 2013. 288 pp. US\$25.95 (Paperback). ISBN 978-0822355007.

I spent two weeks in late May 2014 with two dozen of my college classmates and my professors exploring the capital city and local indigenous communities in Oaxaca, Mexico. Oaxaca is home to a vibrant, multifaceted indigenous culture with a rich history of art and media, which made it a prime destination for our growing Latin American Studies program. During the latter half of our trip, the *zócalo* (the town square) had been transformed into a mass of tents and bullhorns, as the annual local teachers' strike began. While our trip was only affected via additional traffic jams and explicit instructions to avoid law enforcement, subsequent years would not be so calm. Two years later, in June of 2016, that same student trip would be cancelled as the event turned into a deadly clash between Mexican police and protestors.

Erica Cusi Wortham's book on *Indigenous Media in Mexico: Culture, Community, and the State* begins much the same way – recounting her experience with the teachers' union protests while she conducted her research – and the violent ends to which they unfortunately came in 2006. As she explains in detail throughout the book, conflict between the Mexican government and its people still continues, particularly when it comes to the education and political inclusion of indigenous peoples. The difficulty of establishing lines of communication between indigenous groups and more affluent, Europeanized demographics is exemplified in Wortham's commentary on the culture shock of travelling from "Doña Jose's modest home on a steep slope of the Mixe sierra to the walled-in, expansive gardens surrounding grandmother's house in the San Miguel Chapultepec neighborhood of Mexico City" during the course of her research. (Wortham 14) Self-representation and autonomy in media remain critical to establishing political and cultural self-determination for indigenous peoples. Wortham's book focuses on the development of state-sponsored and grassroots initiatives to provide these peoples with the means and knowledge to construct and consume their own forms of media – an initiative which she broadly titles: "Making Culture Visible."

Many of the most vital projects undertaken by the Mexican government to address the problems faced by indigenous communities, detailed in the first chapter, pertain to access to education and methods of media creation and dissemination. In this section, Wortham situates the development of indigenous media in the broader context of Mexican history, and the development of international indigenous rights movements. The goal of the Mexican state dating back to the Mexican Revolution in the early 20th century was to create one *mestizo* Mexican culture. This was sought primarily through assimilation of indigenous peoples, often resulting in the destruction of indigenous culture. The INI (the *Instituto Nacional Indigenista*) and other state initiatives emerged from this framework, and were the vehicles through which indigenous media was "taught" to communities.

The author focuses in particular on the fact that *video indigena* (indigenous video/media) was taught to communities, rather than conceived by them. Just as political conflicts plague the relationship between the Mexican government and its citizens, indigenous media is defined by conflict between the state-sponsored movement and indigenous notions of collectivity and activism. State influence has resulted in these media projects leaning towards documentary projects, and also focusing on cultural topics rather than political ones. However, modern indigenous media trends to distance itself from state-sponsorship both in name and method, and focuses on video as a social process, a *postura*.

State-sponsored *indigenismo* is connected with notions of indigenous assimilation, and the creation of a pan-Mexican culture through suppression of undesirable aspects of indigenous communities. State initiatives forced a distinction between culture and politics in order to ensure that aspects of indigenous community that were preserved were “safe” and posed no threat to the state – unlike distinctive political structures or language. These initiatives addressed indigenous communities without including them in decision-making process in any meaningful way. This in particular promoted the rise of indigenous media as a way for indigenous peoples to both preserve their culture and promote their narrative, thereby “making culture visible” in a way that increased their political power. Naturally, indigenous peoples and videomakers have pushed back upon these state initiatives and attempt to limit association with them. There is a modern trend towards reclamation of the term through traditional notions of indigeneity – which encompasses the desire for autonomy and self-determination at all levels of government.

The second part of the book moves on to explore *video indígena* in a more regional, rather than national context, and several of the initiatives that emerged from the INI and its sub-programs. These regional initiatives attempted to distance themselves from state-sponsorship in an effort to be more impactful and relatable, and tended to see video more as a social process than a static representation of bygone culture.

The final chapter of Part Two distills *video indígena* down to the final, most narrow setting: local initiatives in indigenous communities in Oaxaca and, in a later chapter, Chiapas. Oaxaca is home to some of the most progressive laws regarding indigenous peoples in the nation, including constitutional recognition of indigenous legal and political structures. Media initiatives in Oaxaca focus on the incorporation of new perspectives and the embeddedness of media within the community. One Mixe community radio program focuses specifically on media as a method of identity formation, believing that “seeing and hearing oneself strengthens the community’s sense of self as Mixe or Ayuuk,” directly contributing to the process that Wortham has titled “making culture visible.” (Wortham 142-43) Unfortunately, as the author explains, structural political change remains impossible when autonomy is granted to indigenous communities as passive actors subject to the political discretion of the state, rather than affirmatively agreed upon by both parties.

Wortham then moves on to a discussion of local media initiatives in Chiapas, which were born out of a unique, revolutionary situation prompted by the EZLN and the Zapatista movement. Further, because equipment and training was provided to rebel communities by a binational NGO, the organization was more amenable to incorporating indigenous communal decision-making processes. Chiapas initiatives are then overtly more political than those that were born of the INI by virtue of their inception, and were immediately concerned with sustainability and distribution of their product as a way to promote their narrative to other states and communities. As Wortham notes, the distinction between indigenous media as conceptualized in Oaxaca and that in Chiapas is that media training programs in Chiapas were “anchored to the shared social and political agenda of the Zapatista movement to achieve indigenous autonomy, rather than the preservation of a particular culture.” (Wortham 199) The EZLN remains an active political force in Mexico, disseminating their ideas across all available forms of media, including the internet.

The author ends the book with an exploration of an indigenous film product which provides insight into the filmmaker’s community and way of life. Titled *Dulce convivencia*, the eighteen-minute short film depicts a Mixe man’s experience within his community through the process of production of *panela* (a raw form of brown sugar), and illustrates the importance of filmmaker embeddedness in authentic indigenous media. In addition to this exploration, the book is peppered with illustrations of citizens of indigenous communities and indigenous videomakers, which

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enables the reader to see through the lens, so to speak, of the Mixe and Zapatista filmmakers in their own communities. Wortham's writing is both fluid and succinct, effortlessly weaving together the historical context and the modern constructions of indigenous media as they are found in Mexico today, and bringing the reader into the communities she explores.

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