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Weaving Resistance, Unraveling Assumptions: A Reflective Journey in Guatemala

Olivia Goldstein

Mass Communication
The University of North Carolina Asheville
One University Heights
Asheville, North Carolina 28804 USA

Faculty Mentor(s): Dr. Don Diefenbach and Jeremy Phillips

Abstract

This article explores the personal journey of a student filmmaker producing a documentary film with Trama Textiles, a women's weaving cooperative in Guatemala. Using an autoethnographic lens, this article examines how the filmmaking process became an unexpected space for learning, through navigating challenges of translation, representation, cultural complexity, and global economic interdependence.

Drawing from field experiences in Sololá and Quetzaltenango, I reflect on encounters with Kaqchikel-speaking weavers, the evolving role of traditional textiles within contemporary fashion systems, and the tension between preconceived narratives and emergent realities.

The article questions my positionality as an outsider aiming to amplify—rather than define—indigenous women's voices, while grappling with systemic inequalities that shape their craft. By weaving personal narrative with cultural and economic analysis,

this work considers both the transformative potential and the limitations of storytelling across cultural and linguistic boundaries.

Introduction

Weaving has always meant more to me than simply making cloth. I've long been fascinated by its history, its endurance, and its quiet but powerful resistance.

I couldn't have imagined, when I first sat at a loom years ago, that weaving would eventually bring me to Guatemala—to a women's cooperative born out of civil conflict (McNees, 2018), to conversations that crossed languages and histories, to a project that challenged me far more deeply than I anticipated.

When I traveled to Guatemala, I had a plan: outlines, shot lists, and a clear vision for the story I wanted to tell. But as the project unfolded—and as inevitable surprises arose—I realized the story couldn't be confined to the framework I had constructed in advance.

Ironically, the structure I thought I had avoided was already in place. Despite all my research and academic preparation, the reality on the ground refused to fit neatly into theoretical models, as Borgdorff (2011) argues happens when practice-based knowledge diverges from academic expectations.

As life shifted, so did the narrative. I knew, intellectually, that deviations from the plan were likely, if not inevitable. I thought I was prepared to let the story guide me. But the truth was, without realizing it, and despite my resistance to the idea of forming preconceived notions, I had already decided what I believed the story would be. And over the course of the trip, that expectation had to unravel.

Personal Foundations and Academic Motivation

This project was the realization of a dream that motivated my enrollment at UNC Asheville. My path toward a bachelor's degree wasn't linear; it was shaped by many strange choices and the subsequent experiences that brought me here. My love for fiber arts began in childhood—the feel of fabric, the transformation of simple knots into intricate, functional things, and the deep meanings woven into cloth.

Historically, textile work has been linked to women's labor, often undervalued and confined to domestic spaces, yet holding powerful cultural significance (Murray, 2014). My passion for weaving extends beyond technique; it's about the stories, identities, and histories (and potential secrets) embedded within each cloth.

In 2018, I graduated from Haywood Community College with an associate degree in Professional Crafts: Weaving. It's a credential I treasure, despite occasional doubts

from others. At Haywood, I immersed myself in the technical world of weaving—discussing thread counts, color variations, loom mechanics. This deep engagement sparked my curiosity about how weaving manifests across cultures. For me, weaving is a narrative form: a medium through which resistance, identity, and history are expressed.

Project Planning and Preparation

Together with two classmates, I set out to document a weaving collective in Guatemala, a country rich in indigenous heritage. My research led us to Trama Textiles, a women's cooperative in Quetzaltenango (Xela), located in the Guatemalan highlands.

According to PBS NewsHour (2011), Guatemala's civil war (1960–1996) claimed thousands of Mayan lives, leaving communities devastated. Trama Textiles was founded in 1988 as a grassroots initiative by women seeking economic survival and cultural preservation in the aftermath of this violence (PBS, 2011). Weaving, in this context, became more than a livelihood—it was an act of resistance (McNees, 2018).

Preparing for the project was intense. I navigated unfamiliar academic systems, grant applications, and logistical hurdles—everything from obtaining legal permissions to addressing safety concerns raised by UNC Asheville. Thanks to support from faculty and staff, each challenge was resolved, and the project moved forward.

Documenting Practice: Working with Trama Textiles

Once I arrived in Guatemala, the clock was ticking. Months of preparation condensed into two short weeks. Ideally, I would've had more time—maybe even years—to immerse myself in Trama's community. But under the circumstances, the compressed timeline was unavoidable.

The first stop was Trama's hub: a small building with a courtyard where tables of yarn and spinning wheels stood ready. There, I observed women weaving on backstrap looms—a physically demanding method in which one end of the loom is tied to a tree or post, and the other is wrapped around the weaver's body to create tension (Denham & Green, 2020).

Denham and Green (2020) describe backstrap weaving as an embodied practice requiring strength and endurance, while Casareno and McChesney (2020) highlight its deep cultural symbolism, connecting weavers to their community and heritage.

Watching them, I was reminded how patience, strength, and cultural legacy were intertwined in every motion. Yet beneath the beauty of this work lay difficult truths. Despite its artistry, the global textile market often undervalues this labor, offering minimal compensation for hours of meticulous work.

Even ethical cooperatives like Trama Textiles operate within global systems that don't always provide stable support (McNees, 2018). While I had gone in believing Trama was reshaping Guatemala's textile economy, I had to confront the reality that systemic challenges persisted. It left me wondering, how can systems change without the education that demonstrates how necessary those changes are?

One surprising discovery was Trama's reliance on international volunteers—primarily from Western countries—for marketing, fundraising, and digital outreach. According to Cheng (2016), such collaborations expand global visibility but also raise questions about sustainability and dependence on external resources. Seeing this dynamic firsthand prompted me to think critically about the impact of globalization on local autonomy.

Language, Identity, and Living Traditions

This journey brought me to a village near Sololá, where I met women who spoke Kaqchikel—a Mayan language spoken by approximately 400,000 people (Ethnologue, 2023). Ethnologue (2023) notes that Kaqchikel belongs to the Quichean branch of the Mayan language family and is primarily used in regions like Sololá, Chimaltenango, and Sacatepéquez.

Despite its deep heritage, the language faces challenges, and revitalization efforts are ongoing (Shorthandstories.com). Sololá itself has a rich history, having been established by the Kaqchikel Maya in the 15th century and later becoming a key site during the Spanish conquest (Britannica, 2023).

Walking through its bustling market, I was struck by how contemporary the traditional garments were. I had imagined these ancestral textiles as relics of the past—but here, they were alive, evolving, and fully integrated into modern fashion. The market wasn't just a place to buy cloth; it was a fashion hub where tradition and innovation coexisted, where culture and commerce intertwined. That realization challenged my assumptions in profound ways.

Through conversations—facilitated by a translator bridging Spanish and Kaqchikel—I learned that while some women felt a deep cultural connection to weaving, many viewed it primarily as an economic necessity, shaped by language barriers and systemic inequalities. This nuanced reality challenged the narrative I had initially

constructed, compelling me to reconsider my assumptions. I had convinced myself that participation in this craft was voluntary—because for me, it is voluntary. I choose weaving because I can. I come from the privilege of education, of access to language—the language in which commerce exists in my country.

I love weaving. Many of the women I spoke with also shared their love for it, but it was a different kind of love. They described loving weaving for the support it offers, for the income it provides. It was a love rooted in gratitude, in survival. One woman told us, “This is all we know.” That was a very different story than the one I had set out to tell—and one I didn’t have enough time to fully explore.

Critical Reflections and Next Steps

Presenting the documentary at the Undergraduate Research Symposium was a moment of pride, but also a reminder that the project wasn’t finished. I recognized the importance of centering the women’s voices more prominently, and the documentary evolved into a layered tapestry of emotions (had to include a weaving pun), cultural insights, and critical reflection. Weaving, in this context, became more than a craft—it symbolized connection, resilience, and the intricate interplay of individual stories within larger social fabrics.

Being a student during this journey was exhilarating. There’s something powerful about being surrounded by people who invest in your potential, who celebrate your achievements, who gently—or firmly—push you forward. It’s rare to be in a space where curiosity is encouraged, where experimentation is welcomed, and where a whole system works in step with you to achieve your goals. That environment transformed not just my work, but my sense of possibility, resilience, and belonging.

Looking back, the experience still feels surreal. Even now, nearly two years later, revisiting the footage feels like stepping into a life I both admire and barely recognize—a chapter defined by curiosity and stubborn hope. And when I reflect on it, I feel a deep sense of *nachas*—that swelling Yiddish pride. I’m proud of what I accomplished, proud of the risks I took, and above all, grateful—for the journey itself, for every unexpected turn, and for the lessons woven into every challenge.

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