

## Some notes from my Mexican research – Oct. 20 – November 11, 2015

### Oct. 21 – Saltillo, Coahilla

I visited Gilberto Aboites and Esther Falcon who came to York on an exchange in the 1990s. Esther works as a volunteer at the Centro para Migrantes, a kind of safe house for migrants working their way up from South and Central America to the dangerous border crossing from Mexico into the U.S. When I visited her two years ago and showed her the Milagros for Migrants installation that Min Sook and I



put together, she decided to initiate a similar project at the centre with the migrants passing through the centre. She collected suitcases and finally last year during the Day of the Dead festivities, they constructed altars to those who had been killed in their efforts to get to the border. This year I did a video interview of her describing the emotional process in great detail. There were some very touching moments such as the child who wrote the name of his father who was killed along the route north.

### Oct. 22 – Guadalajara, Jalisco

I had dinner with Ofelia Perez-Peña, environmental educator and collaborator for 20 years, along with a group of environmentalists and a filmmaker working with communities on environmental and production projects around Lake Chapala.

### Oct. 23 – Guadalajara

Lunch with Gabriel Torres, well-known academic, longtime collaborator (did historical research on tomato workers) and key advisor for the film project. He and Ofelia have started an alternative peoples' university for communities around Lake Chapala, and are also involved in organizing a pilgrimage following the legendary Aztec pilgrimage, from Atzlan to Teotitlan, which led to the founding of Mexico City. This year it is a ten-day pilgrimage led by Indigenous leaders and stopping at sacred sites, aimed to educate Mexicans about Indigenous cosmovisions and ecological issues.

Gabriel described the connection of Day of the Dead ceremonies to agriculture: Indigenous peoples believe that the ancestors are alive in the land, and feed the growth of food, which is also brought to them when they visit on Nov. 2.



We visited his daughters, Sari and Ana and his gorgeous granddaughters. Ana is a filmmaker I've known since the 1990s, and her partner Joshua is working on water and environmental issues.

(As Gabriel drove me to Fernando's house that afternoon, the streets were totally empty, the city in lockdown, and residents had emptied supermarkets, as they awaited the ferocious winds and rain of Hurricane Patricia. Fortunately, there was little more than a rainfall, no damage, and speculation that the government had hyped the potential danger to showcase their preparedness, military strength and technical efficiency.)

## **Oct. 24 – Guadalajara**

A difficult day: third anniversary of my mother's death, learned about a dear friend with thyroid cancer, and struggled with uncertain expectations about developing a formal agreement with Six Nations before we submitted the Connections grant proposal.



I had lunch with Pato Esquivel, filmmaker for IMDEC, the Mexican Institute for Community Development ([www.imdec.org](http://www.imdec.org)), Mexico's major training centre for popular educators and popular communicators, and a collaborator on both the Tomasita and VIVA projects. For the past two years, I've been consulting with Pato and his colleague Luis

Fernando Arana Gutierrez about being involved with the film as camerographers. While I didn't have anything concrete to propose at this time, I brought him up-to-date on the project. And coincidentally, he informed me that he and IMDEC staff are now working on food sovereignty issues with an Indigenous community in Chiapas, where he has been training youth to produce their own videos of plays they've created about food issues. This seems like another potential link for the film....building on a 30 year relationship.

### **Oct. 25 – Guadalajara**

I spent two days at the home of Fernando Garcia, who's included in our project. Before leaving Fernando's, he completed the form for the grant, and Hilda declared that she'd like to come to Canada and do her MES on community development after their baby is born. Fernando would want to work in the food movement, but it could enrich his projects here as well.



I did three video interviews this day (and am learning to do sound!):

- 1) Fernando Garcia, a wonderful young food activist, one of those mentored by Dianne Kretschmar in Muskoka, and so included in our grant. He now has his own community food centre, Cosecha en Casa, where he helps people start gardens and offers workshops. The sun had come out and so I took the camera

to his new “huerto” or garden, and started to film, when it started to pour. We moved under the plastic tented roof, and continued, but the sound of the rain is constant through the interview. Nonetheless, I have quite a bit of material from him – on his experience of learning organic agriculture from Dianne, and then trying to apply these ideas in the Mexican contexts.

- 2) Gabriel Torres, my collaborator of 20 years and advisor to the project. I asked him to talk about his early research on tomato workers, the UniMaia alternative university involving communities around Lake Chapala in environmental and food production projects, and the pilgrimage they are developing with Indigenous groups.



- 3) Ofelia Perez-Peña, another collaborator of 20 years (we had a 3-year exchange with her and Gabriel in 1996-99 that had 12 of our students doing a term in Guadalajara), who works closely with Gabriel on both UniMaia and the pilgrimage. I asked her to talk more about the work with the communities around the lake (that includes alternative energy and appropriate technologies as well as food production) as well as more detail about the pilgrimage. It’s interesting how both of them now have status within their respective universities, and so are mainly using their positions to promote this community work, doing less and less traditional academic work. In particular, I was interested in how she conceives of her work as a non-Indigenous person collaborating on the pilgrimage. Some of her comments I found a bit disconcerting (we are all Indigenous), but when she spoke of how she had learned to acknowledge the leadership of the process had to be Indigenous, and how she understands her role as an ally, helping to link



their struggles to non-Indigenous communities sharing similar goals, I could connect with the tension I've felt in our process.

I can see Gabriel and Ofelia as interested in what we produce about food sovereignty, and as possibly offering case studies from the communities around Lake Chapala, as well as what they are learning from connecting with Indigenous communities through the pilgrimage. The images of corn, for example, seem embedded in most Indigenous cosmologies.

### **Oct. 26-27: Nurio and Paracho, Michoacán**

Next was my visit with Fulvio Giaonetto and Maria Blas Cacari, included in our project. I took a bus Uruápan, Michoacán, where I transferred to a local bus that took me to Paracho. Maria's daughter Serena, son-in-law Miguel and granddaughter Lindsay, picked me up there, and introduced me to the town square, honouring the guitar-making capital of Mexico, and filled with preparations for Day of the Dead.

They drove me to Nurio, the small Indigenous village where Maria and Fulvio live. It was declared autonomous about 10 years ago, after the Zapatista leader Comandante Marcos had visited during "La Otra Campaña" (the other campaign), to listen to people envision what they might create outside of the state. Apparently, Nurio was one of the only communities that seriously welcomed Marcos and determined to be autonomous; they have even managed to evict federal police, army and narco-traffickers with their internal forces and willingness to stand up to the state authorities. It is also a community without access to Internet so we had to drive to the city to get email.

When we drove into the family compound on a hill overlooking Nurio, I was amazed at their huge home, designed by Maria, built into the mountainside and complete with winding staircases, balconies, and an enormous fireplace that you can actually walk into to prepare tortillas over an open fire.





As neither Fulvio nor Maria were there when I arrive, Concha invited me to learn how to hand make and bake tortillas, providing them with some chuckles and me with sticky fingers.

Maria came home late, having spent the day at an agricultural workshop in Morelia, and when she first entered with another Maria, I confused the two. She was dressed in western clothes while the other Maria wore traditional Purépecha garb. I later learned that Maria no. 2 is a friend who was married a week ago. Fulvio and Maria, as the padrinos of the couple, prepared an enormous feast in their home for over 200. As is the tradition, then, the newly weds move into the home of the padrino/madrina for a month and basically work for them – cleaning, cooking, etc. as part of the exchange. The house was constantly filled with other relatives, as well as Fulvio and Maria’s other children, Brian (about 11) and Ana (married and with a baby).

Some purepecha words: Nipaya – adios (good bye); Nachuskia – buen dia (good day); Natseseconlia – mucho gusto (Nice to meet you); Niahey – que vaya bien (Go well)



Fulvio arrived early Tuesday morning from Mexico City where he has been facilitating the development of a CSA (Community Shared Agriculture) in a Nahuatl Indigenous community on 60 hectares near Xochimilco. I learned more about his amazing background (he first came to the region as a UN expert in the 1970s, married Maria, and continues to work both locally, regionally, and internationally).



Michoacán is the avocado producing centre of the world – 110, 000 hectares – but at a disastrous cost of deforestation, which ultimately is not progress. Corn is also a major crop, and there is rich volcanic soil in the area.

Fulvio filled me in on the broader corporate food system, too, explaining that Walmart (now the leading food retailer in the world) has opened 752 stores in Mexico in the past 5 years. When I started the tomato study 20 years ago, it wasn't even present, and the major supermarket was Bodega Aurrera, which is now also owned by Walmart, but considered the equivalent of "No Frills." Walmart does buy from local producers, but they basically rent space to producers who don't get paid for what is sold for at least a month later. They also allow organic producers to sell outside the store.

Fulvio has trained several young men in his organic production of fertilizers, etc., including his son-in-law Miguel who worked with him on Plan B last summer. Miguel described for me how he was treated when he went to the Labour office in Mexico City to apply for the Seasonal Agricultural Workers' Program (SAWP).

The Mexican officials there treated him and others as though there were stupid Indigenous peasants. And when they were told that they had the right to complain if their rights were being violated, one of the experienced migrant farmworkers piped in, that it actually meant the





Mexican consulate in Toronto would tell the employer, who would then not ask you back again. Fulvio and others seem to have created a new category of worker for Miguel which is an expert in this organic agricultural practice that he is developing. Fulvio will take his whole family to Plan B in the spring (the family story also fits our intergenerational theme, so we should go back there to see them).



Fulvio introduced me to another protégé, Santiago, Maria's nephew, who took me to his home to meet his sister Magalena who runs an Independent Purépecha community radio station out of the bedroom; she is just completing a MA in film production, so would be a great addition to a camera team if/when Alex and Lauren come back to do some serious filming in Michoacán (we've now built this into the budget).

That evening Maria invited me to go with her to the home of women friends who were shucking corn in preparation for Day of the Dead festivities. We arrived after the shucking was complete, but sat with 6 other women chatting for about an hour. I felt the most foreign yet, in this context, but privileged as they were really gossiping, speaking fast, Purépecha interspersed with Spanish, and laughing a lot. Maria gave me a synthesis of one story told by a woman who took on physically the drunk husband of her sister who had been beaten by him.



## Oct. 28 – Angawan, Michoacán

Maria insisted that I get to see a volcano before leaving, so she got me up at 6 AM, and we headed off (with the newlyweds Maria and Domingo, Concha, and two of Maria's teenage nieces visiting from Wisconsin) for Paricutin. Once there, we hiked up through



the woods and volcanic rock to an amazing site of where in 1943 the volcano had erupted and obliterated a town, leaving the remains of two churches jutting out of the black rock. Lots of picture taking with cell phones and I did a video interview of Maria there, as she described what we were seeing. We took horses back to the car, supposedly to save time, but we stopped along the highway to collect plants and firewood...and when we got home, we ate lunch, she rushed to take me to Uruapan (about an hour away) to catch my bus, which I missed.



I did get one 3 hours later and eventually made it to San Miguel de Allende. The big advantage was that after two days without wifi connection, the bus was wired, so I was able to work on the Connections grant which over this week had become a full-time and very stressful job.

### **Oct. 29 – Nov. 4: San Miguel de Allende, Guanajuato**

This week was mainly a holiday (mixed in with four days of “turista” illness), celebrating John’s triumphant entry into San Miguel (see FB: Bi-Ciclo for Amistad) after 44 days and 4,000 km on bike to raise funds for a midwifery school and anti-violence program. We both rested in the home of the NGO CASA, and immersed ourselves in the Day of the Dead festivities (I’m proposing an exhibit based on Mexican views of death).

### **Nov. 5 – 6: Guanajuato, GTO.**

A side trip to visit my cousin in Guanajuato gave me a chance to finally visit the famous Mummy Museum, which ties into my Wabi Sabi project.

### **Nov. 8 – 11: Mexico City**

I stayed, as usual, with Antonieta Barrón, the 75-year-old-and-still-working feminist economist who was my first collaborator on the Tomasita project 20 years ago, and has since done two sabbaticals in Toronto and Guelph studying Mexican migrants in Ontario. She provides the kind of statistical information and analysis that we all need in our more ethnographic or cinematic work with women migrants.

Here I connected with two different kinds of contacts relative to the project:

#### 1) Veronica Velasquez and Elena Herrera

Lola Figueroa, a Mexican who completed her PhD about Indigenous women in Nicaragua and Ecuador at York two years ago (I was on her committee), currently teaches social anthropology at CIESAS in Mexico City. She connected me with two of her doctoral students whose research focuses on Indigenous women migrant workers. Ironically, Elena’s focuses on tomato workers who migrate from Guerrero state to her home state of San Luis Potosi, while Vero’s work is with the Purépecha women in her home state of Michoacán, exactly in the region I visited two weeks ago, where Fulvio and Maria live and work. Antonieta made us lunch and offered the two young anthropologists an incredible background around migration, gender, and work.

I did video interviews with all three of them: Antonieta's focusing on the changes she has seen in the migrant women labour force over 20 years (one major change is that now that child labour is being eliminated, women will more likely stay home, and thus run households, grow food, etc; or they move as single women, or widows).

Elena Herrera has researched the movement of Mixtecas from Guerrero to San Luis Potosi. She also knew about the company I studied, Santa Anita which she understands no longer exists, but along with El Gato And Expreso ended production in Sinaloa in recent years due to extreme drought. The women in Guerrero who are no longer migrating (because their children can't work with them) have now started small food projects, for both subsistence and for income; there is now a Consejo de Jornaleros in Guerrero.



Vero Velasquez has been working mainly in Cheran, Michoacán, which is an autonomous community, like Nurio, except that its autonomy has been negotiated with the state, and so they still get state resources. They fought for this through a process that was initiated by women who moved their hearths/fireplaces into the street for weeks, where they created communal kitchens. Their protest was over the 'ecocidal' destruction of the forests for increasing industrial and agrochemical production of avocado. They were reclaiming the forests as sacred territory. In this process, women, Indigenous people, and elders drew more respect, and even the youth got involved, creating community radio and TV, and creating murals, etc. There has been a lot of cancer incidence among women, due to the pesticides, an issue that Antonieta encouraged them to investigate and advocate.

Vero is also familiar with the different processes of autonomy in Nurio, where Fulvio and Maria are leaders. Nurio is associated with the Zapatista autonomy, and outside of the



state; it is small, more Indigenous, less westernized, and has defended itself against both state military forces as well as narcos. Vero gave us insight into how the narcos used the avocado businesses for money laundering, and paid peasants big bucks for their land, contracting young men to work in the avocado business, offering them perks like boots and women.

In the video interview, she goes into some detail about the organizing of resistance and alternatives by the women in Cheran. If Alex and Lauren go to Michoacán, this would be a very useful connection. It also gives me a sense that we could focus on both Indigenous women in autonomous communities as well as those creating alternatives within the context of state-controlled areas.

## 2) Sara San Martin



Twenty years ago, when I worked on the Tomasita study, I also collaborated with popular educators at IMDEC in Guadalajara. One couple I was close to moved to Mexico City over a decade ago, and have major positions with NGOs. Daniel Ponce is Director of a National Commission to Prevent Discrimination. They produce all kinds of materials for schools and communities around all kinds of discrimination; he showed us a new tool they've been using to identify hate messages on twitter, and to get social media debate going. Sara San Martin is outgoing director of the Centre for Ecumenical Studies (CEE - <http://estudiosecumenicos.org.mx/>) which works in communities all over the country on issues of defense of territory, arms control, community feminism, Indigenous rights, etc. She invited the incoming director Luisa Guzman and another staff member Zarel Leon Segura to meet with me. They told me about projects in communities in Guerrero, Oaxaca and Puebla, where they are working with poor

Indigenous communities that have established some autonomy. In La Costa Chica de Oaxaca, for example, they have been creating “agrarian statutes” which give Indigenous people agrarian rights vis-à-vis incursions by forestry and mining companies (80 of the over 300 mines in Mexico are Canadian-owned). They described how communities have been forced into the drug trade through poppy growing, for example, which offers them more livelihood than other options.

The control by narcos over production is definitely a theme to note. I’ve also been thinking about focusing on communities where they have been fighting both deforestation (where the forests are seen as part of their livelihood) and mining (taking over and contaminating agricultural land). Nurio where Fulvio and Maria are represents the forestry issue, while perhaps one of CREE’s communities could be one where Canadian mining is prevalent. They are very open to being involved in the film project, and have invited me to a national gathering next Wednesday where there will be representatives from their various community projects. They’ve also suggested I connect with GEA – Grupos de Estudios Ambientales (<http://www.geaac.org/>) that is working nationally on issues of GMOs and runs an Escuela Campesina in Chilapa, Guerrero and in Zacatepec, Oaxaca.

Finally, on the last day I had with John in Mexico City before he flew back to Toronto with his famous bike, we visited two museums that offered relevant context: El Museo de la Revolución and El Museo del Arte Popular. I include a couple of images here.



Serendipitously, while at the Monument of the Revolution, we happened upon a demonstration of thousands of campesinos from around the country. The two major organizations were CIOAC (<http://www.cioac.org.mx/>) Independent Central of Agricultural Workers and Peasants,



and CODUC – Coalition of Democratic Urban and Peasant Organizations (<https://www.facebook.com/coduc/?sk=wall>); both are independent of the official unions, and had some historical links (according to my host Antonieta, whose husband was the only Community Deputy in the govt) with the communist party.



This ends my report to this point. John returned to Toronto today while I am extending my stay to attend an historic gathering organized by three autonomous universities, bringing together Indigenous and social movement leaders to construct a Mexico outside of the state, “a world,” as the Zapatistas say, “where many worlds fit.” I’m attaching the program and the website: [tejiendovoces.org](http://tejiendovoces.org). It features both presentations and small groups on subjects very connected to our project: