

In 2009-2010, Emma Shaw Crane traveled in Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras developing and facilitating the Indigenous and Garafuna Women's Media and Poetry Project, a series of poetry and community radio workshops. Below is an excerpt from her final project report. Her letters home follow.

Final Report Excerpt

Between June 2009 and February 2010, I worked with the grassroots collective COMPPA (Comunicadores Populares por la AutonomAa) in Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras. We conducted a series of three-day workshops for women as part of COMPPA's Popular Communication, Community Radio, and Gender initiative. Eighty women from the Triqui, Mixteco, Huave, Mixe, Nahuatl, Ixil, QuichÄ, Queq'chA, PocomchA, Lenca and GarAfunas people participated in the workshops, which were offered in partnership with the people's organizations CACTUS (Centro de Apoyo Comunitario Trabajando Unidos) and their Red de Radios Caracol, and UCIZONI (Uniòn de Comunidades IndAgenas de la Zona Norte del Istmo) and their Red de Radios IndAgenas del Istmo in Oaxaca, Mexico. In Guatemala, we partnered with the Alianza por la Vida y la Paz and Radio Libertad in PetÄn; CPR"Sierra and Radio Uniòn in QuichÄ; UVOC (Uniòn Verapacense de Organizaciones Campesinas) and Radio KamolbÄ Chamtaq?a in Alta Verapaz, and the women's organizations Ixq'iq and IxmucanÄ. In Honduras, we worked with OFRANEH (Organizaciòn Fraternal Negra Hondureña) and their Red de Radios GarAfunas in Atlçntida; COPINH (Consejo CAvico de Organizaciones Populares e IndAgenas de Honduras) and radio La Voz Lenca in Intibucç; and the Movimiento por la Recuperaciòn y Titulaciòn de Tierras de Zacate Grande on the Pacific Coast.

The workshops took place at a different site each time, and were hosted by one of our partner organizations. Women traveled from all over the country to participate, fostering a rich cultural and organizational exchange as they worked alongside compaûeras from different communities. During the three-day workshops, participants learned technical radio skills, created radio pieces (programs, shorts, interviews, analysis, slogans, songs, etc.), discussed gender and political violence, wrote poetry, and shared experiences and challenges from their own organizations and radio stations. The results of the workshops

included over sixty hours of material produced by women for their community radio stations and twelve new weekly programs run by women. We saw increased participation of women in all of the radio stations we worked with. The project culminated in the publication of a book of poems and radio essays by women and girls who participated in the workshop, as well as a short video documenting the workshops.

I am thrilled to report that the Popular Communication, Community Radio, and Gender project received funding for 2010. This financial support will allow the workshops to expand into a two-year series.

In addition to offering poetry and media workshops to women, I worked with COMPPA to support the Escuela de Comunicaciùn Popular, a two-year series of workshops offered to men and women from our partner organizations in Guatemala and Honduras. These four-day workshops train new popular communicators and build communication capacity.

In the wake of the June 28th, 2009 military coup in Honduras, COMPPA offered workshops to GarAfuna and Lenca journalists in Tegucigalpa who covered the mobilizations and resistance movements to the coup. COMPPA provided two weeks of intense production support for community radio stations, as well as independent coverage of the marches and subsequent state repression.

My favorite aspect of the project was the workshops, which happened roughly once a month in rural communities (plus the coup workshops in Tegucigalpa). During the three days workshops, we stayed with families or with the women in communal spaces, ate food organized and prepared by our host organization, and worked long days. I enjoyed the time with my colleagues Luz and Maria from COMPPA, and getting to know the women that we worked with. It was one of the first times that I did explicitly women's centered work, and it was moving and fascinating to build intimacy with them. Most participants live in break-back rural poverty. They had survived the Guatemalan genocide or civil wars in Mexico and Honduras. They balanced raising children with engagement in revolutionary struggles against repressive governments. And they did all this while negotiating gendered inequality and sexism within those same social movements.

The workshops were structured around the creation of radio programs that aired on the local community radio station. The context, challenges, and achievements of each country were very different:

Mexico. In Oaxaca, we worked with two indigenous people's organizations, UCIZONI and CACTUS. Women in the workshops were diverse: some came from 'immigrant' towns like San Francisco del Mar, in which the vast majority of income is remittances from family members who work in Northern Mexico and the United States. Other women came from campesino communities dependent on household level agriculture, and engaged in struggles for indigenous autonomy. There is an escalating state-sanctioned paramilitary war against organized indigenous communities, and people who are visible in the resistance are targeted and killed. A year before I arrived paramilitaries shot and killed Teresita MartAnez, 24, and Felicitas Bautista, 20, both reporters for their local indigenous CACTUS radio, *La Voz Que Rompe El Silencio* (The Voice that Breaks Silence). They were en route to cover a local news story. Shortly after I left, our beloved compañera Bety Cariño was murdered, along with Finnish human rights accompanier Tyri Antero Jaakkola. Both of our partner organizations, UCIZONI and CACTUS, are under constant surveillance and threat. The community radio networks suffer from a lack of infrastructure and organizing, confusion about who is responsible for what, and overworked community leaders—all symptoms of the ongoing violence. The women's group from Oaxaca was the youngest, composed almost entirely of women under twenty. Only six of more than twenty-five women participated in all three workshops; many emigrated or went to the city to work over the course of the year. We struggled logistically, and while the majority of the radio stations were receptive to young women and included several women leaders, others did not create a welcoming or safe environment for teenage journalists. Despite these challenges, three new radio programs were born. We were able to support the establishment of a network of women communicators and foster friendship and exchange between young women affiliated with CACTUS and UCIZONI.

Guatemala. In Guatemala, we worked with three campesino and indigenous organizations (CPR-Sierra, Alianza por la Vida y la Paz (CPR-PetÄn), and UVOC) and two women's organizations (Ixqiq and IxmucanÄ). The Guatemala workshops were by far the most

successful, thanks to a high level of organization from CPR-Sierra, the AVPV, and UVOC. Over twenty women completed the series. Five new regular radio programs were born, and a new radio station (with a significant group of women popular communicators) was founded in CPR-Sierra. The workshops included a big age range, from thirteen years old through women in their early seventies (including a granddaughter-grandmother pair). Challenges included reverberations of violence from the recent civil war (particularly in CPR-Sierra, the site of an intense conflict over resources); language differences (several participants did not speak any Spanish, so we relied on translations and visual learning); and significant distances between our partner organizations, which meant long travel days for participants. It was inspiring to observe how the Alianza por la Vida y la Paz and UVOC worked to integrate and honor women within their organizations, in accordance with their religious and ethical commitment to gender equality. I was privileged to work with well-supported women organizer from both groups. On the other hand, male leaders dominated many groups and women often expressed frustration and sadness at their politically marginal positions.

Honduras. In Honduras, we worked with COPINH, OFRANEH, and Movimiento por la Recuperaciùn y Titulaciùn de Tierras de Zacate Grande. Workshops were hosted by OFRANEH and COPINH, and resulted in the creation of four regular new radio programs by women. COMPPA installed a new radio station (Radio Sugua) in the OFRANEH community of Sambo Creek, and led a brigade to rebuild Radio Fçluma Bimetu after it was burned down. [Video about our work with Radio Fçluma Bimetu: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q-WPF_EYn3s&feature=player_embedded. For a longer video about Radio Fçluma Bimetu:

<http://www.youtube.com/user/MrComppa-p/u/4/d-atkne2ucM> and
<http://www.youtube.com/user/MrComppa-p/u/3/PSVdSjlBa7Y>

The workshops were interrupted by the coup, but we were able to recover time during our unexpected February visit. Challenges in Honduras included intense repression in the wake of the coup, the organizational difficulties the coup presented, and a time conflict for the COPINH women that prevented them from attending the final workshop. One of the most rewarding and fascinating aspects of the Honduras workshops was collaboration between Lenca and GarAfunna women, whose nations are geographically distant but have

contemporary common experience and are engaged in struggle against some of the same wealthy developer-landlords. It was the first time seeing the ocean for some of the Lenca women, and when the GarAfuna women traveled to COPINH, for many it was the first time in the cold highlands of Honduras. Because women are valued and well positioned institutionally within our partner organizations in Honduras, particularly OFRANEH, it was a pleasure to work with those organizations, and we were supported and encouraged by the male leadership.

Writing poetry with the women was another favorite part of the project. It was the only aspect of the workshops that I managed, organized, and facilitated completely independently. I was influenced primarily by hip-hop, and had worked mostly with comfortably literate urban young people. In the workshops I was initially adrift and unsure how to approach or push the women to write. Learning how to create curriculum that was relevant culturally, linguistically, and across a variety of ages affirmed my belief that poetry truly is for everyone. It is an indispensable tool for strengthening voice, articulating our visions of the world, and recovering from trauma. Our book of poems is a testament to the ways in which poetry is a vehicle for the indispensable truths of women's lives. For an article I wrote and published about the poetry process, as well as photos, please see: <http://desinformemonos.org/2010/05/%E2%80%9C-la-poesia-es-un-acto-politico-porque-implica-decir-la-verdad%E2%80%9D/>

The level of preparation, community organizing, logistical maneuvering, and post-workshop documentation surprised me. I found I had very little time to do anything other than work, a dramatic change from my life in college, where I worked only part time, spent hours hanging out with friends or going out, lived with eight people, and visited my family often. The long hours at COMPPA taught me important new technical skills: how to do video editing, improving my audio editing skills, writing grants and reports, polishing my written Spanish, and increasing my knowledge of Spanish language poetry, particularly work by indigenous and Central American women.

The most difficult aspect of the project was collaborating with and working alongside people living in devastating poverty and multiple levels of intense and ceaseless violence. From state and paramilitary violence (assassinations, disappearances, rape, and torture) to the mundane, everyday violences (persistent hunger, lethal lack of health infrastructure,

clean water, and electricity, the replication of larger violence in family and community dynamics) communities that support COMPPA are at war. This war plays out in struggles over resources, land, and political representation. It is inscribed onto the bodies of the people living in the communities we visited, from smashed-in skulls to hands permanently twisted into fists from overwork.

The military coup in Honduras on June 28th, 2009, just before I arrived in Mexico, was a tremendous surprise that forced a sudden change of plans. In the wake of the coup, it was too dangerous for women to travel across the country to attend workshops. Because journalists were needed on the ground in the capital, we decided to offer mixed workshops instead, focusing on the production of news and analysis for Lenca (COPINH), GarAfuná (OFRANEH), and campesino (Zacate Grande) community radios. The coup highlighted the necessity of community-based media. It was both challenging and wonderful to witness the massive popular mobilization against the dictatorship. The violence of the coup in Honduras, post-genocide repression and poverty in Guatemala, and the mounting dirty war in Southern Mexico were three very different historical, political, and cultural contexts. In all of them, people still cooked food, laughed, fell in love, argued with their families, raised children, and danced. When writing about violence, I find it dangerously easy to engage in a language of disaster and chaos. This doesn't adequately represent the mundane and often beautiful details of everyday life: sharing melting ice cream in the Tegucigalpa heat, reading aloud at night by flashlight, or a smiling grandmother walking a tiny girl to school in the mountains. However, as a moving observer between three countries, writing from the safe distance of a big metropolis, it is not difficult to see that terror was ever-present, even in places at 'peace.' For me, the most devastating moment of the project was this past April, when Bety Cariúo was murdered. She was the co-founder and lead organizer at CACTUS (one of our partner organizations in Oaxaca) and was shot and killed by paramilitary assassins. [For more information about Bety's murder: <http://www.cpt.org/cptnet/2010/04/30/oaxaca-mexico-paramilitaries-attack-human-rights-convoy-kill-cactus-director-and-f>. For a video interview produced by COMPPA, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yWpo4X2Hibk>] She was driving with a human rights delegation to deliver food, water, and aid to San Juan Copalç, an autonomous community

in the Triqui-Mixteco region. The paramilitaries form part of UBISORT, a right-wing coalition closely aligned with the Oaxacan government. Bety co-facilitated workshops with us, welcomed us into her home, drove us to and from communities, and comforted me when my family fell apart last summer. Her death is absolutely unthinkable to me, because in my memories of her she is absolutely brimming with life and laughter and warmth.

When I saw photographs of Bety's body lying in the back of a pickup truck, I thought about the men who, on orders from the state government, waited for her with guns and absolute impunity. I thought of Eduardo Galeano's poem, 'The Nobodies':

Who don't speak languages, but dialects,

Who don't have culture, but folklore.

Who are not human beings, but human resources.

Who do not have faces, but arms.

Who do not have names, but numbers.

Who do not appear in the history of the world,

but in the police blotter of the local paper.

The nobodies, who are not worth the bullet that kills them.

Community media and poetry are about the nobodies talking back, insisting that they have faces, names, children, complex and resilient cultures and languages, and dignity.

As Bety said in an interview with COMPPA last year, 'We are fierce and rebellious women, and we're here to say that we will not go on like this. We want our words to be heard; we want our daughters to have a different future, one in which they are taken seriously, one in which they are authorities, in which they make decisions, one in which their rights are not trampled, and they can raise their voices just like anyone else.'

This project was my opportunity to keep growing up in a place that taught me not only about hope but about what Michael Taussig calls 'terror as usual' for the poor. Being a child at a moment of war-however 'peaceful' politicians claimed this war to be-was an experience of total powerlessness. My parents worked for Physicians for Human Rights doing forensic work on the torture and disappearance of community leaders. The things

they saw and heard reverberated in our family. Returning to Chiapas at twelve, sixteen, seventeen, and eighteen years old, I saw that the war I witnessed as an eight-year old had continued. The struggle for survival in the face of paramilitaries, drought, food shortages, and lack of medical care had never ceased. Surrounded by 30,000 troops, Zapatista and indigenous communities live in a sort of suspended war, a war converted, most of the time, into small and endless daily humiliations, what anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes calls 'everyday violence'. When I was nineteen, I stood in the village of Acteal, where forty-five people suspected of being sympathetic to the Zapatistas were massacred by paramilitaries in December of 1997. I felt so tired with grief I wondered if I would ever come back to Chiapas. The opportunity to return and carry out this project in Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras was a huge and deeply personal gift from the Judith Lee Stronach Baccalaureate Prize. This project was a chance to bring what I learned at UC Berkeley-and the privilege of graduating from an elite American university-back to a place that shaped and haunted me. In one of the workshops, I wrote:

te juro que las sombras me hablan
(I swear the shadows speak to me)
sometimes i look over my shoulder
and see the skeletons of my childhood
sleeping in dry riverbeds,
fistfuls of juncia [pine needles] in
broken fingers, they wear
plastic sandals
embrace wooden guns
child who saw too much
they whisper
you grew up anyway
now what will you do
with these memories?

This project made an important difference in my life because it was a way of making peace with the ghosts I always felt accountable to. It allowed me to address my own trauma as a witness to their deaths. Part of growing up, I think, is unlearning powerlessness. It is beginning to recognize potential for resistance in desperate and difficult situations. My Judith Lee Stronach project was a chance to engage in the world not as a child or a teenager but as a young adult, with abilities and resources. This opportunity forced me to grapple with questions of praxis, solidarity, and ethical, useful engagement with marginalized communities. As a member of a radical and grassroots collective, I was exposed to the ways in which different activists choose to position themselves politically, and how organizations function internally.

The experience engaging in these processes has changed how I think about the world again, and brought up difficult questions. What is the purpose of organizing and resisting in places where those who are brave enough to raise their voices and dare to demand to be treated with dignity are murdered with total impunity? What does it mean to stand in helpless witness not only to the violent murder of leaders Walter Trùchez in Tegucigalpa and Bety Cariùo in Oaxaca, but the everyday torture of living twenty years with a broken back, like Tùmas in CPR-Sierra? He somehow survived a brutal beating by soldiers during the genocide. Now he cannot stand up straight or sleep because of the pain. Does the presence of international solidarity draw unwanted attention, and put in danger the lives of those who are perceived as 'dispensable' by the state? In Zacate Grande, Honduras, six people face trial for operating an 'illegal' radio. I used money from this project to buy necessary equipment for that radio, and trained several women at workshops in Honduras. These six radialistas face prison time. They have already endured brutal repression from both the military and hired thugs. What does it mean to do work with people who are risking much more than I am, who are risking their lives and the lives of their families, for whom there is no plane ticket to a safe and distant home? The eight months of this project were a time of intense and at times awkward, painful growth. Intellectually, I was suddenly without the structure of study groups or neatly organized readers. I was alone, and surrounded by people who were overworked and wary of enthusiastic recent college graduates and their postcolonial theory. I realized it is

often difficult to balance praxis with reflection, especially in contexts of perpetual crisis and endless to-do lists.

As a poet and facilitator, I was pushed to adapt and revise the ways of writing and teaching I learned while at Berkeley. I had never done poetry in languages I didn't speak (many of the women we worked with spoke indigenous languages as their first or only language). I also learned strategies for supporting illiterate women to create poetry. For example, I asked them dictate to a facilitator, other women or their literate children. The biggest challenge was building feedback intimacy and confidence within the groups, because the workshops were short and separated by weeks and months. I was pushed creatively because, for the first time in years, I wasn't part of close-knit group of poets. I had no formal structure or deadlines to force me to write, and no feedback. I felt caught between two languages (how to write in English about things that I lived and thought about in Spanish? How to write in Spanish, a language I had not been raised in? How to write in Spanglish-in many ways my truly native language-if only people from home would understand my poems?) Often, I simply choose not to write, because I did not feel completely at home in either language, and because work felt more pressing. This is the central challenge of developing artistically while working full-time.

This time gave me the opportunity to push against limits and expand my faith in my own abilities, though the process of personal, professional, and ethical growth included many desperate moments. I remember waking up one morning in CPR-Sierra, Guatemala, covered in fleabites. I was exhausted after a nightmare in which I was sleeping on a pile of bones stretching from the river to the hut I was sharing with a family of six. Breakfast was pork that smelled rotten (and sure enough, I was throwing up by lunch), and sleeping next to a very sick child that night. It started raining the next afternoon, catching us to our knees in mud and far from shelter. My previously detailed and thoughtful field notes deteriorated: 'Soaked again and everything smells like mold or death. Nino fell in a pig pond, now I have to sleep with him for a week.' A few days later I wrote: 'Getting long stares from the men who are threatening the CPR people. I want to jump out of my skin. Someone followed me home last night in the pitch dark and I had to turn off my flashlight and hide behind a rock. I'm so sick of this shit.' A few pages later, for reasons I

can't recall, I made a three-page list of my favorite foods, and included COFFEE in all caps on every page.

There were also moments of such hilarity and happiness that I still start a laugh when I think about them: an attack of collective sex talk-induced giggles as twenty women fell asleep on the floor in Honduras; coming home from one trip covered in bruises because Chris, Nino and I started a game where the loser got punched on the shoulder (and trying to explain this to my family in San Cristóbal); teaching a workshop with Kevin, age 3, asleep on my hip; sneaking away with Maria to watch the stars and drink beer on the beach; the usual inappropriate inside jokes a small group develops after months in the same van; washing my hair in a fast freezing river under hanging vines. Making space for happiness is something that Bety taught me on my first workshop. She took us dancing at the local fair after a long day and a four-hour drive down the mountain into Huajuapán. 'Seriously, you're too young to be tired,' she said. 'We're going out.' These hours and days of humor and silliness helped us all negotiate difficult conditions. It helped me develop ways of being that were sustainable, even within unsustainable situations.

At the final workshop in Honduras, Teresa Reyes, an OFRANEH leader in the Garafuna community of Triunfo de la Cruz, said to the group, 'You know, this work is incredibly difficult, but it is not impossible.' To me, this epitomizes the messy and contradictory practice of 'doing development,' community organizing, and resistance in a political reality that disappears the voices of poor, indigenous, and Black communities, and particularly women. It is insanely frustrating. Engaging collaboratively with people who are negotiating, surviving, and resisting active cultural genocide, dispossession, and murder demands developing critical and honest ways of understanding oppression, and recognizing the ways in which it interrupts plans, destroys lives, and makes the smallest everyday tasks almost impossible.

Two central lessons I take with me away from this project are 1) This kind of work is infinitely complicated, and these doubts and contradictions will probably stay with me forever; and 2) Struggles for dignity are difficult, but they are not impossible, and they are necessary. Popular education demands exchange and mutual transformation. I was changed and inspired by working with my colleagues and friends in COMPPA, all of them brilliant, funny, brave, and committed. The women that I worked with in Mexico,

Guatemala, and Honduras generously shared their lives with me, their ways of living feminism, the quiet and brave resistances that are often overlooked. I am proud of the work that we did.



Memorial



Emma with poets