

## Growing Old Together: Visualizing and Reflecting Change

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She is slightly older than I am. We know each other since years. She worked, did pottery, raised her children, migrated, worked and looked after her family again. I worked, did research, filmed, and taught at the university. I always filmed her family when visiting them; she grasped with the time going on that my filmic records turned into being documents of her family history.



### Starting fieldwork (1980)

Mexico 1980: I – then 27 years old – wanted to write a dissertation on pottery in the context of developmental anthropology. I visited the area several times, choose a village, was put into contact with a potter family, arrived at their compound early January, and stayed. They kindly accepted me, we shared our time, and I managed to visit them once in a while afterwards and to stay in contact with them till today.

### How I remember my arrival

I visited the family in December and asked them if I could stay with them for a while. They said that it would be ok. But when I returned in January, they were very astonished. So many people had visited them telling them that they would like to return for a longer visit and they never came. So they did not take my question serious. They asked me to sit down with the grandmother under the avocado tree and started to run around carrying things from one room to a wooden house. Altogether there were 7 adults and 7 children. I had no clue which woman was the mother of which child, which man the father of whom. I was completely confused.

### How she remembers my arrival

#### Videoclip: How my friend remembers my arrival in 1980 (recorded 2013)

My friend remembered my arrival quite differently, mainly looking for a place where I could stay, was a topic. I had forgotten that completely and remembered it only after a while of chatting with her. I asked her what they were thinking, that I stay with them for so a long time. That was not irksome to her, she says. And visiting them in Florida, I am invited to stay with them also. I am coming to the conclusion, that our search for individualism, for being alone sometimes, to have some privacy is not their ideal. They love to do things together, to be together, to exchange their daily experiences.

### Doing research on the pottery

Living with a potter family was great for me. I was able to observe the daily routine of the family during nearly one year, I was able to join them going to the different markets, see the preparations, the marketing, and the festivities. They advised me how to behave and negotiate with the informants and they helped me to get into contact with other potters and do my research.

The family was somewhat special, as the women were very dominant: there was the grandmother who had suffered a lot in her life; there were two sisters, one unmarried, one had just left her husband with her 3 children – both were producing green pottery; and there was their sister in law, my age, also doing pottery besides looking after her 4 children. The three men, the grandfather (mostly being away with the cows on the meadows), the son (mostly being in the fields or woods), and a nephew (doing pottery also but mostly hanging around in the village), were somehow absent from daily life.

Being a young woman, the women would never allow that I would leave the house alone. They brought me to the people I wanted to interview and made sure that I was brought back. Or, after school, a child was sent with me. It was a mixture of protection, control, and feeling responsible. For me, it was quite comfortable, I got used to it, and I missed it somehow later, when I was allowed to walk around the village alone. By the way, women very often walk around the village in company.

### **Keeping contact (1981, 1983/84, 1985, 1987) Discovering Saints**

When I returned home the first time I got the feeling of having missed something. Concentrating so much on my research about the pottery, I had not witnessed that the villagers are crazy about effigies of saints and Jesús. Going through my notes I discovered some hints, but ....



So I decided to return to the village the following years at different times of the year thus participating in an array of fiestas for saints and Jesús. The unmarried woman of my family loved to help in these occasions. I was able to join her very often thus discovering the female side of these feasts. In the literature about saint's feasts little is written about the women's part and even less of the daily routines preparing a feast. Working with the women in these feasts was just very rewarding not only concerning the feasts but also because they were chatting about their everyday life all the time.

## Filming the family (1989)

1989: We (my cameraman and I) started an ethnographic film project recording some village feasts and portraying the potter family.

I wanted to show the manifold activities of the women, the daily life, and the economic implications.

### Videoclip: Filming the family making pottery in 1989

Later I asked the main protagonist to comment the film. She did so, but she was not feeling very comfortable. She is a modest person and she was not sure of the usefulness of the film. This changed only when her grandchildren from the US visited her. Suddenly the film became a piece of family history.

## Sons living in the US

### Videoclip: Will the migrated sons come back? (recorded 1994)

At the time of the interview her two sons were migrated to the US since several years. The elder son was sending money regularly; she saved it and started to build a house for him. She was convinced, that he would return to the village finally.

## Migrating to the US (2000)

2000 something happened, I never was thinking of: My main informant and by now my friend moved to Florida to look after her grandchildren. Because of migratory processes, her husband and daughter in law had to leave the US for one year, so that they could return afterwards with papers, e.g. stay there legally in the US in future.



## Family life in Florida (2001)

This motivated me to visit the family in Florida in 2001 recording their daily life. This time, they were interested in the recordings – perhaps because my friend was thinking, that she would return soon to her home village and that she would like to have something to remember.

### Videoclip: Now living in the US selecting grapefruits (recorded 2001)

My friend was working at that time in a grapefruit packing place. She advised me to tell the manager that I am a teacher and that I would like to record the place to show to my “pupils”. Later she was eager to see our recordings, an event which turned into an interesting feedback situation.

### Videoclip: Seeing the filmic records exchanging information (recorded 2001)

The family was asking questions and explaining each other their special work situation. For me it was a discovery. Creating situations where people would chat with each other instead of doing interviews. But it is not really easy to reach this point.

## Struggling with fate

My friend started to use our video camera to record her life in the US and her one reflection on living there.

### Videoclip: Struggling with fate – Dreaming to return home (recorded 2001)

Most interesting was a conversation she had with her sister in law about their life here and there (the home village). Repeatedly they stress, that they would prefer to live in their home village, that there they have the liberty to work when and how much they want whereas here in Florida there are always people telling them what to do when. Moreover, they talk about their sons, and if they would return once.

## Settling down – unwillingly



I visited my friend once in a while in Florida and the people in the sending village, observing and recording changes here and there. I witnessed how the topic of migration was becoming more important every time. In the home village people were thinking much about the life of those having left, being very often in constant contact, hoping to see them soon, perhaps that they would return for ever.

***Worries and fantasies***

Many older migrants in Florida are not really happy to live in the US and they are dreaming to return to their home village in due time. They keep contact with their relatives, they return to the home village once in a while, looking after their house, their parents, and their children. But, there is always good reason why they are not able to return just now. So they are imprisoned somehow in this state of living in-between.

My friend and I used the little time we had together to discuss the difficulties she was encountering – very often off camera and away from the family. Through her I got deep insights in a migrant family life, the worries and hopes.

Besides of getting this informal information, I gathered a lot of visual material documenting the changes, but I still search for a way to make sense out of it without compromising the protagonist's family.

Always, questions concerning the feeling of belonging arise in a subtle way constantly. Migrants – being shifted between various locations, living in some sort of translocal or even transnational space – are looking for a point of orientation, which serve them here and there, which make relationships in this non-local and at the same time local space possible.

**Jesus Nazareno – A point of orientation**

The effigy of Jesús Nazareno serves this purpose in an excellent way. Jesús Nazareno is the most important image in the home village, and by now copies of him migrated to California, Colorado, Utah, and Florida. At each location the villagers started a feast for Jesús Nazareno. Relatives in the home village support the feastholders in the US in one way or the other. All people involved in these activities know very well, what is going on in the other places. Mainly the women are phoning regularly relatives in the home village, and the villagers are telling what they have heard from the other places.



This year (2013) the feastholder in Florida was the son of my friend. I asked them if I could stay with them during the preparation of the feast and the feast itself. Knowing, that I would come with my video camera to record the feast and the preparations they were happy to host me, which gave me an excellent opportunity to observe the feast in Florida from inside. Doing research in the context of migration is somehow difficult, as normally a research is not living with migrants constantly. And the migrants are very short of time, working all day mostly.

## **Jesus Nazareno – A social meeting**

I had seen and filmed the feast in the home village various times, once in the house of the brother of my friend. Then, we went there every day helping in the preparation of the food, the location, the adornments, ... Mainly the women were meeting on this daily basis. They were working continuously chatting a lot.

### **Videoclip: Women preparing the feast in the home village (recorded 1998)**

In Florida, the situation was very different. The men and most of the women are working – 6 days a week – morning till late afternoon. They are living in small houses with little gardens if any. There is no time and no space to meet over weeks in the feastholders' home to prepare the feast. So, the feastholders had to ask several persons to prepare part of the meal and to fabricate the decorations at their home.

### **Videoclip: Sporadic meetings preparing the decoration in Florida (recorded 2013)**

The sister of the feastholder explains him, how she thinks to arrange the decoration for Jesús because she cannot hang it herself because she has to work that day. In the background her mother, my friend, is very content, as all will look very fine.

Only the last evening and night, certain dishes are prepared at the feastholders home. Mainly the comadres of the feastholder and their neighbours were helping there. Others were preparing food at their home.

### **Videoclip: The night before the feast in Florida (recorded 2013)**

So whereas in the home village the feasts are an occasion to meet over a longer period on a daily basis, in Florida the meetings are very sporadic, always in rush, hectic. As I was living with my friend, I experienced the sudden visits or the spontaneous shopping excursions after work or also the continuous little works done at home in the evening (over month).

## **Jesus Nazareno – New social relations**

In one way the feast was completely different from the one in the home village. Migrants of other places were consciously invited to come to the feast and to bring with them their friends. The feast for Jesús is a point of orientation for all of them but it is also an occasion to build up new relations.

### **Videoclip: Serving the dinner new helpers - new relations (recorded 2013)**

While serving the dinner the feastholder, the man in the blue shirt, was not only helped by his two sisters, but also by one of her friends, a colleague from work of my friend, and a woman who was not related with the feastholders family at all.

Living with my friend gave me an opportunity, to get to know the people involved in the feast, to get the information about their relations, to get an idea of their social network and how it expands.

## What to publish? Tacit understanding?

On the occasion of my last visit I asked my friend what she is thinking about publishing the video material I produced during my stay and during my earlier stay.

### Videoclip: Do people like to be filmed? (recorded 2013)

She made a clear difference between the records of the feast – which everyone is eager to see and to have – in Florida, in the US, in the home village (I had to complete a long DVD edition before I left Florida) – and the records I made of the family, which are taken as private records. There was never a problem of publishing the film on the potter's family, which they saw before publishing it. And in case I would produce a film on "my" Mexican family, it would be presented to them first – as I will also do with a film about the feast itself of course.

## Open question

Does this have to do something with a feminist anthropology?

I have to admit, that I was never very interested in feminist anthropology. My interests are much more in economic anthropology, social anthropology, in religion and migration, in visual anthropology etc.

Being a woman, it was obvious for me that I would work mainly with women; that I would try to understand their life and their way of perceiving the world. That I started to work with a family where the women were and are very dominant was by chance. The topics I worked on – mainly pottery – and I am working on now – migration and fiestas – are fields where women are involved in very much. But they are active in the family, in the backyard, and in the background, leaving the stage to the men. Working with them, joining them in their daily and festive activities, accompanying them over the time and places was enjoyable; working with the video camera was very rewarding as they started to use it for their purposes, e.g. recording the family history and their feasts. We never discussed my work, my filming in advance, as my friend said once: you have your work, I have mine. Trust in each other is the basis of our relation and actions. I thank my friend very much for this gift.