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Performative Pilgrims and The Shifting Grounds of Anthropological Documentary

Luis A. Vivanco

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Introduction: Debating the Maya Calendar during "Una Gran Romería"

On the day of the Spring equinox every March, one of the pyramids at the renowned Maya archaeological site of Chichén Itzá in Pisté, Yucatán, Mexico experiences a phenomenon in which the sun casts a serpent-like shadow on one of its balustrades. In any given year, this phenomenon attracts thousands of Mexican, North American, and European tourists, professional and amateur archaeologists and archaeo-astronomers, practitioners of New Age religions, ambulant vendors, and state authorities. Most of these people come, at least ostensively, to acknowledge and celebrate the genius of the Ancient Maya, although, importantly, many also come to maintain control over the tourist masses, or to make money selling souvenirs and food. In 1995, the equinox event drew more attention than usual, attracting record numbers of visitors, among them conspicuously large numbers of New Age religious practitioners, who came because of the apparent calendrical significance of that particular year. For New Agers, this equinox was to usher in the "Age of Aquarius," and they had converged on Chichén Itzá because of their belief in the propitious coincidence of this event with a cyclical renewal on the Maya calendar, itself apparently marking the arrival of "The Age of Itzá."

Among the visitors for this particular occasion was a pair of cultural anthropologists, Jeff Himpele and Quetzil Castañeda, gathering video footage for a documentary film about the tourism spectacle surrounding the equinox phenomenon. In the video they produced, *Incidents of Travel in Chichén Itzá*, the ethnographers explain in a brief voice-over narration that this event has been described by a Yucatecan intellectual as *una gran romería*, or "a great pilgrimage," which in Spanish carries with it connotations of bachanalia and carnival.[1] The concept of pilgrimage frames the video's approach to its subject matter, which is an inquiry into the various representations and meanings that visitors and workers project onto the archaeological site, its ancient inhabitants, contemporary Maya, the equinox phenomenon and the religious activities taking place because of it, and onto each other. The video shows that, like other popular pilgrimage sites, a preoccupation with imagery of tragedy, death, the sacred, and saintly figures are central elements in the development and experience of Chichén Itzá.[2] The video also shows

that, whether they are there to engage in specific ritual activities or out of general curiosity, people come to this place on a quest, seeking something that lies outside the normal patterns of their everyday lives, possibly some form of affirmation or completeness. In these senses, the video has certain goals and techniques one would expect of the ethnographic documentary genre, namely a commitment to representing actually existing peoples, struggles, and events in service to persuasive arguments about the world.[3] But these goals and norms alone do not define how this video was produced or its narrative structure, for in important respects, it also demonstrates a profound skepticism toward certain basic assumptions about documentary, especially filmaker omnisicence and an unproblematic ability to "capture" an unfolding social reality on film. Differing from traditional approaches in this genre, it engages in a deliberate "blurring of boundaries" between documentary and fiction, participant-observation and performance, social analysis and the recognition that knowledge is always partial and incomplete.[4] Seen in this light, the filmakers themselves seem to be performing a pilgrimage of their own, balancing a search for the Ancient Maya (through the eyes of others) with an intention to participate in a raging debate about the future of anthropological documentary film.

In an effort to explore the contours of this debate and the shifting grounds of ethnographic documentary emerging from it, this chapter examines how Incidents of *Travel in Chichén Itzá* internalizes critiques of, and offers a provocative alternative to, certain realist conventions of filmic representation. This exploration is not inspired by a taxonomic impulse to classify emerging techniques of documentary film production, but more to evaluate how this work reflects ongoing debates about the dilemmas of visually representing religious experience and cultural processes more broadly. The videomakers take seriously the now well-known assertion of a crisis in ethnographic representation and filmaking, where the defining qualities of non-ficiton documentary – realist narratives, rhetoric, and meanings in which the emphasis is on making expository arguments through the use of visual ("factual") evidence – are not acceptable given the aesthetic, interpretative, and political manipulations and asymmetries at the heart of representational processes. Because the status of film and video as document is not persuasive[5] – films and videos are themselves cultural representations, each with specific qualities, techniques, and dilemmas – the choices about how to represent other cultures and cultural processes on film are less clear-cut than ever.[6]

Paradigms of polyvocality, reflexivity, transparency, and dialogism represent new representational possibilities, and increasingly normative frameworks, in which a central goal includes the revision of unquestioned hierarchical relationships inherent in cross-cultural research and visual representation.[7] Performativity is another complementary possibility, in which disembodied observational techniques give way to interactivity and the challenges of rendering visible the filmaker's embodied experience and subjective position.[8] Within this framework, ethnographic authority and authenticity, which have been based on the separation of subject and object (the greater the rhetorical distance, the more authoritative), can no longer solely render the object visible while both ethnographer and ethnographic processes remain invisible. Its highly suggestive potential, according to Nichols, who has written extensively on ethnographic documentary and its alternatives, is that "Performative documentary suspends realist representation. Performative documentary puts the referential aspect of the message in brackets, under suspension….These films make the proposition that it is possible to know difference differently."[9]

This commitment to self-reflexive performative action becomes apparent during an early scene in the film. It is a scene in which we view one of the ethnographers, Quetzil, in front of the camera (which Himpele is operating), self-consciously entering a pyramid where he encounters a middle-aged man explaining to a couple of young women in English that a basic aspect of the Mayan calendar is the 52-day cyclical period. After eavesdropping for a short time, Quetzil turns to the camera with a questioning look, inquiring if it is on, to be sure that the following interaction will be filmed. He greets the man in Yucatec Maya, and asks in English, "How do you know so much?" We learn that the man is a Catholic priest from the U.S. Midwest, working in a Yucatec Maya community not far from Chichén Itzá. The priest explains that the contemporary Maya themselves do not appear to appreciate the calendrical details of which he speaks, and adds that they do not understand that this particular day – the equinox – had long been acknowledged in their culture as a celebration of new life; today it is seen as a Christian celebration. He concludes, "They've lost all their knowledge of their own culture...The more they learn about themselves, the better." A woman standing nearby dressed in white (common dress among New Agers) interjects, in a low-voice, that the last equinox was five hundred and twenty years ago. Quetzil challenges her, pointing out that it happens every year. The woman continues to explain that "This is really big, I mean in the Maya calendar, which is

two hundred and sixty years, this is five hundred and twenty years." She adds that because it is the end of the milennium and a time of such significance ("The Maya believe that we must change from the age of belief to the age of knowledge…They call it the Age of Itzá, and we call it the Age of Aquarius") that she came to play her didjeridu "and to do a healing." Quetzil begins to ask how she came up with the numbers she used, but the priest announces in a tone of voice implying a bemused dismissal of the New Ager, "me voy amigo!" ("I'm leaving, friend!"). Quetzil coos to the man, "I would very much like for you to participate!" And so he stays.

What ensues is an inspired interaction, in which the the anthropologist, New Ager, and priest debate about the various cycles in the Maya calendar, their meanings, and how they articulate with changes in the universe. Assuming the tone of an expert, Quetzil makes technical assertions about Maya time periods and cycles (explaining the various meanings of "May," "katuns," and "tuns"), and asks the woman to explain from whom she got her own calculations. The priest says to the New Ager, perhaps more because Quetzil asked him to stay than his own desire to be there, that "the Mayans here are not aware of of what you're talking about." The woman protests that her assertions "are very common knowledge right now," and eventually concludes, "It's not an issue I have any desire to question…I respect the culture of the Maya." The camera pans to eavesdropping tourists listening in on the discussion. After a back-and-forth of several minutes, there is neither a resolution of the debate nor a formal closure of the conversation and the three each self-consciously go their own ways.

It is necessary to ask what is the point of this segment, for there are others like it in the video, in which the eavesdropping ethnographer is drawn into and participates on camera in unresolved discussions about the meanings of Chichén Itzá, ancient and contemporary Maya cultures, and why all these people have come to this place on this day. This scene demonstrates, in several important respects, that this documentary diverges from "epistephelic" expectations of the genre that emphasize objectivism, omniscience, and a "closer indexical relation to the real world."[10] Foremost, it puts the purported expert front-and-center, willingly (and not so willingly) being drawn into debate with the presumed subjects of investigation. This can have the effect of rendering authorship open to new scrutiny, including all the vulnerabilities this can project, as we see when Quetzil verbally stumbles, repeating his own explanation of the Maya calendar as if to convince himself that he got it right. In this sense, the video manages imagery of anthropology-in-the-making without assuming its social authority or editing out (at least some

of) its uncertainties, in the process evocatively showing us an uncomfortable space where the dictates of conceptual relativism and seeing the world "from the native's point of view" butt up against the positivistic legacy of anthropology's commitments to "get-the-facts-straight" through description. Significantly, the videomakers are very careful to not resolve the debates or correct their contradictions, and there is no voice-over narration here to reinforce the claims made by the anthropologist or to override what people say on camera (a most facile solution during editing to ensure anthropological authority). Committed to representing multiple and competing perspectives on the equinox and its meanings, the scene tries to avoid imposing any singular or privileged authoritative interpretation of events. Anthropology, it is projected, is but one voice among many clamoring for attention and authority in ongoing struggles to impose normative interpretations on Chichén Itzá.

Does *Incidents of Travel in Chichén Itzá*, which self-consciously employs techniques of self-reflexivity and embodied performance to achieve its goal of decentering anthropological authority, help us know difference differently?[11] What is the difference that is known? These questions get to the heart of performative documentary's potential to reconfigure the relationship between filmaker and Other, documentary and fiction, description and evocation. This is an especially compelling question in light of this volume's concern with representations of religious belief and practice on film, in that it forces us to ask if and how these techniques (re)constitute representations of the sacred, which happens to be a central concern for many of the visitors to Chichén Itzá. Not everyone is as sanguine about the possibilities of reflexivity and transparency to resolve the representational asymmetries and epistemological dilemmas of ethnographic documentary-making.[12] A crucial reason for this is that reductionistic attention to images and their creation does not alone necessarily stimulate ameliorative action. What happens outside the imagery on film and filmaking processes – political-economic and other structural inequalities, deeply-held orientalisms, the fact that viewers are not "cultural blank slates" – are just as relevant in determining the outcomes of documentary film, so that techniques of transparency, self-photography, performance, and so on, do not necessarily lead to an alteration in the status of the people being filmed (if indeed, that is a goal). Similarly, even audiences attuned to the politics of cross-cultural representation do not necessarily focus on the specific construction of imagery itself in ways that filmakers intend, much less do they know how to distinguish and analyze the subtleties of the embodied action of anthropologists. As we reach the limits of such

technical filmic practices to radically transform neither the anthropologist's nor the viewer's relationships between self and Other, West and non-West, the point is not to reinstate a positivistic vision of ethnographic documentary but to acknowledge the possibilities these newer practices and norms raise for ongoing cross-cultural dialogues both within and outside the vision of the camera's lens.

Beyond "The Sacred Journey"

By adapting the name of Stephens' "classic" 19th century explorer's travelogue *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatán*, Himpele and Castañeda imply a connection between Stephens' adventures and their own quest to make sense of Chichén Itzá.[13] But for the anthropologists, their goal is not an explorer's quest to reveal an unknown and primitive Other, much less a region outside of world history, but an appreciation for what Beatriz Sarlo has in another context called "the exacerbation of the heterogeneous."[14] It is simply not possible to view the area in terms of its isolation from the world; just as the Yucatán has become a key site of First World leisure tourism, the Maya have become major icons of indigeneity in global cultural flows. Many contemporary visitors to Chichén Itzá have assumed Stephens' legacy, though, and underlying their visit to the Yucatán is a quest for a particular exotic Other, the Lost Maya. These are a people of genius and sophistication who built great cities and astronomical observatories, but with a fatally-flawed social order that led to their ultimate collapse and disappearance. One of the major assertions of this video is that there is no unity to this search, and in fact everybody seems to be in search of and doing something different. New Age religious practitioners of various nationalities and forms of worship and dress (Tibetan lama-imitators, Korean monks, people dressed in white flowing robes, etc.), middle-class North American beach tourists and college "spring breakers" visiting from nearby Cancún, non-indigenous Mexican youths, INAH (Mexican National Institute of Anthropology and History) personnel who police the site, tourism guides, souvenir vendors from Pisté (the Maya village nearest the archaeological zone) and the surrounding region, regional Maya tourists and political leaders – each at some point enters the frame of the camera, willfully and in some cases unwittingly expressing opinions, confusions, critiques about the archaeological zone, the equinox, why they are there.

Early in the video, we overhear the voice of an American tourist, who says "Everyone's doing their own thing." The video adopts this point of view, and a major goal is to document the jostling, confrontations, denials, dismissals, and convivialities that take place between visitors (including the videomaker anthropologists), between visitors and vendors, between state officials and various visitors, between state officials and vendors, among others. There is a proliferation of voices and perspectives, with the result that there is no one group or individual who can fix the meanings of Chichén Itzá and what is taking place there. Representations flow in many directions, and these incongruities are reflected in the non-linear narrative structure of the video. Although organized very loosely around the flow of a single day in the life of the archaeological zone (that is, from morning to the afternoon, when the "big event" of the shadow-casting occurs), and interspersed with atemporal visits to surrounding tourist sites and communities, it does not seek to taxonomize the various visitors or their perspectives, and it jumps from scene to scene in a fragmented fashion. The fact that it was filmed using a video camera, which provides an aesthetic of immediacy and informality, reinforces the visual sensation that the videomakers were inclined on the ground to "take things as they come."

This (fragmented) narrative of fragmentation is reflected in, and reflects, the number of highly differentiated activities that take place in and around Chichén Itzá. Tourists take pictures of the archaeological zone, carefully seeking images of the ancient city without any other tourists in the photograph. They eavesdrop on each other and make fun of other tourists. They especially spy on and make fun of the New Agers, as when a group of young Mexicans sarcastically chant like the New Agers they are watching, ending their chants in a storm of laughter. Maya visitors explain why they came ("to see the shadow"), and suggest that New Age chants referring to Hunab Ku ("the one true god of the Mayas") mean nothing to them ("We are Catholics," says one Maya woman). Between their efforts to prevent New Agers from practicing their rituals, INAH officials criticize New Agers for their naïve reliance on the Gregorian calendar to calculate the arrival of the "Age of Itzá" (which will actually come in 2012). They also point out that "real Mayas do their rituals elsewhere," not here in the archaeological zone. In a scene far from the archaeological zone, an elder Maya man considers the casting of the serpent shadow ("is it true?" he asks), and explains by demonstrating how a rope casts a shadow if you put it in front of the light. Asked what he thinks is the meaning of the serpent shadow, he

impatiently sputters, "Meaning?! The meaning…how it…how it…the sun…the…the…the change of the sun. That's what it means." And so on.

As the brief voice-over narration at the beginning of the video explains, there is an important theoretical point in this heterogeneity and lack of neat closure.[15] Many people come to Chichén Itzá seeking to clear a space for themselves to create an unobstructed vision of the Ancient Maya city. This process began with the very invention of Chichén Itzá as an archaeological site in the early 20th century, as Anglo-American archaeologists "peeled back" the jungle to reveal this place. This process marks the Maya as a mystery, a "lost civilization," based on a vision of Chichén Itzá as an abandoned city, which is inscribed on this space through its (re)construction as an empty ceremonial center. Today, visitors, vendors, and tour guides ceaselessly reinscribe the vision of the archaeologists in their movements through the space and the meanings they project onto the reconstructed pyramids. It is a vision that highlights the mystery of the Ancient Maya, while largely rendering contemporary Maya invisible. This is reflected in photographic practices of visitors; as one woman explains, she wants to take a picture with nobody in it, to show what things were "really like." Nonetheless, anthropology's authority is never complete, because its vision and inscription on the space of the archaeological zone compete with other intentions and uses – New Agers seeking to practice eclectic rites that affirm a dramatic shift in universal spirituality, the Mexican state's construction of Chichén Itzá as a museum of national patrimony and identity, INAH personnel trying to control the physical movements of visitors and maintain the secular zone free of religious activities, Maya vendors who see the space not as a place of "lost Maya," but as a space to sell goods, etc. That is what their narrative says, but there are other elements here, for we have to add to this dynamic a couple of American cultural anthropologists, Himpele and Castañeda themselves, whose goal seems to be a critique of anthropology itself, and any closure about archaeology's hegemony here is in question. This, of course, is a long way from "National Geographic"-type documentaries about Chichén Itzá, whose singular focus on the mysteries and genius of the Ancient Maya is so dedicated that they ignore the contemporary realities of archaeological invention of the site itself or that Chichén Itzá itself is a form of tourism infrastructure built to host thousands of people a day all year long.

In several respects, the non-linear formal structure of the video and its theoretical argument suggest a critical departure from certain structural-functionalist frameworks and

dichotomies that have held sway over tourism and pilgrimage studies. For example, one of tourism studies' basic presuppositions, that the activity of tourism can be divided into "hosts" and "guests" in which the boundaries, expectations, and relationships between the two sides is defined in terms of their cultural differences, economic inequalities, and so on, is blurred in favor of a more complex vision of tourism.[16] Such a binary orients one of anthropology's most influential films on tourism, *Cannibal Tours*, where filmmaker Dennis O'Rourke seeks to capture tourists ("guests") in their quest for the exotic and in their acts of constructing the Other, while Papuan Iatmul ("hosts") themselves develop and express their own alienated and suspicious representations of Western tourists.[17] The film is "a representation about making representations,"[18] whose goal is to show the vast cultural divide between tourist and the Other, and whose effect in the end is an Othering and exoticization of tourists themselves. O'Rourke's point is that powerful representations and orientalisms frame the touristic quest for native peoples, blurring the lines between the ugliness and primitivity often imputed to native cultures, and the presumed modernity imputed to tourists.

Although inspired by O'Rourke's film (in the sense that they are also interested in the fact that tourists arrive with and seek to confirm certain specific visions of the Other), Himpele and Castañeda reject the possibilities for unitary "hosts" and "guests" at Chichén Itzá. In terms of the latter, the most destabilizing presence to a simple host-guest binary is the presence of local Mayas touring the archaeological zone, themselves engaging in a complex process of curiosity-seeking and identity destabilization. In terms of the former, vendors describe their ongoing conflicts resulting from the infusion of new vendors coming from other villages because of a regional economic downturn. Late in the video, we see the deep dissatisfaction among locals – and their threats of political action – at the state government's displacement of vendors from the main tourist avenue and the archaeological zone. There is also a scene in which several leaders in Pisté describe struggles between their community and the state government, which led to their kidnapping of a state-owned bulldozer and establishment of a road blockade to achieve recognition of their political claims.

The destabilizing of this simple binary has several important effects. For one, the notion that there might be "resistance" to tourism and tourists among local peoples does not play out in a straightforward way. Indeed, as the film shows, when locals engage in resistance movements or actions related to tourism at all (as in the kidnapping of the bulldozer, or conflicts between

vendors about who can sell souvenirs and where they can sell them), they are engaged in resisting other Mexicans or the Mexican state, not necessarily the tourists themselves. Secondly, and perhaps even more importantly, this approach does not reduce analysis to the "impact" of tourism upon local populations, a near-sacred lens within tourism studies.[19] This orientation is so powerful that much of the anthropological study of tourism seems to exist as an exercise in "impactology."[20] Within this framework, tourism is understood in rather simplistic terms as a core-periphery phenomenon, reducing tourist activity to market penetration, often with overtones of economic domination. "Hosts" are both passive and "traditional," with something to lose (their culture), while "guests" represent the agency and forces of modernity. In contrast, Himpele and Castañeda suggest that what is taking place at Chichén Itzá are disjunctive and multicentered practices of tourism and pilgrimage, opening an intellectual space to consider how a highly dynamic and contingent phenomenon becomes a resource for defining and articulating religious practices, new cultural identities, and for interacting with others.

This vision of Chichén Itzá automatically complicates the construction of tourist activity as a "sacred journey." According to this influential formulation, which draws heavily on Victor Turner's ritual process theory, travel is understood as "structurally-necessary, ritualized breaks in routine that define and relieve the ordinary."[21] What gives the act of tourism special meaning, like other rituals of sacralization, is the passage from the ordinary and "profane" world of work to the symbolically and morally "sacred" world of travel. Furthermore, it is supposed that between tourists a form of *communitas* emerges, in which people are bound together in a common experience of liminality and equality. This theoretical framework arguably makes a strong linkage between tourism and pilgrimage, for it endows tourism with the qualities of explicit religiosity emphasized in notions of pilgrimage, without the experience of religiosity being defined in terms of any single religious tradition. Indeed, as Edith and Victor Turner have asserted, "A tourist is half a pilgrim, if a pilgrim is half a tourist," emphasizing that the experience of pilgrimage need not be defined solely in terms of its explicit religiosity or that tourism be understood as a purely secular endeavor.[22] Undoubtedly, *Incidents of Travel in Chichén Itzá* contributes to this deconstruction of any rigid lines between the implicit religiosity of tourism and the explicit religiosity of pilgrimage, if we accept that the common demoninator between them is a "journey out of the normal parameters of life, the entry into a different, other, world, the search for something new, the multiple motives of participants, ranging from homage

and veneration to the simple impulses of curiosity."[23] But by emphasizing divergent practices, conflict, and competition over *communitas* and integration, and by expressing a multiplicity of meanings about why people are there and what they are doing, it is apparent that the experience of *communitas* is neither universal nor expected. If anything, instead of creating an alternative and inclusive functionalist order, the experience of touring Chichén Itzá serves to define and reaffirm differences between people.

For example, there is a scene that takes place in the area of the ball court, in which Quetzil approaches a group of several American men and women tourists, to ask them what their opinions are about an activity taking place nearby that looks like a New Age ritual. A man answers, "I was just eavesdropping," to which Quetzil responds with a self-conscious laugh, "So are we!" The man suggests that he will return to find out, and seemingly emboldened by being on camera, begins by asking a participant about it, and finds out that it was a ceremony of solar initiation for the Age of Itzá. Invited to join in, he and one of his companions join a circle of people holding hands and stand there for a while seeming to meditate. They seem uncomfortable and awkward. After the ceremony, as he and his companion return to their titilated friends, the man asserts, "None of us really knew what we were doing, you could get whatever you chose from it." His companion differs, suggesting that she felt a vibration that "was kind of weird. It was calming, it felt different." Perhaps what this woman felt is what Turner referred to as a sensation of "spontaneous communitas," an unexpected feeling of unity and integration.[24] However, what is significant is that there is a clear lack of resolution here. Whether it is the continued skepticism of the man or the dismissive, even mocking attitude of their companions, they reaffirm that the New Agers are still Other, and indeed, part of the spectacle of visiting Chichén Itzá on this day.

Situations of *communitas* compete with forces of disjuncture, not only because of the different motivations and practices that bring people to Chichén Itzá, but also because different visitors occupy asymmetrical positions within the highly-policed realm of the archaeological zone. This is apparent in the ways INAH officials regard and treat New Agers, for they are a potentially destabilizing presence given the fact that they are openly practicing religious rituals. There are several scenes in which INAH officials interrupt New Age ceremonies while they are taking place, asserting that it is illegal to practice religious activity on the grounds of the archaeological zone. But, interestingly enough, INAH officials seem to target small groups of

New Age worshippers, and not a large tour group of New Age practitioners who have come with their Mexican tour guide/spiritual leader. This group's activities consist of walking in circles around one of the main pyramids, which elicits confusion among the participants of the "what-are-we-doing-now?" variety one might expect to see in any large tour group. As one woman explains, they have "Lunch at Mayaland hotel, do a ritual, and then I'm not sure, we get instructions one step at a time." They also have a brief ceremonial encounter with members of the Maya Council, composed of regional political authorities, in which their tour guide/spiritual leader admonishes the Mayas of their need to reclaim the spiritual legacy of their ancestors. Yet the INAH officials seem to let these activities happen without interruption. Perhaps it would be too difficult to control so many, or perhaps it is related to the fact that they are not burning incense and chanting (an example of an explicit ritual in one scene) means that they can "pass" as not engaging openly in religious activity. Perhaps the efforts to control them were simply not "caught on film." But in their filming, editing, and brief and sporadic voice-over narrations, the videomakers leave many such loose ends and uncertainties.

Such narrative uncertainties persist largely because Himpele and Castañeda are resistant to impose a totalizing account about what they see going on around them. This does not mean, however, that there is a corresponding collapse in their search for the diverse meanings of visiting the site as tourists and pilgrims. This is apparent in the way that the video manages questions of origins. The first frames of the video are presented as questions about the Ancient Maya – Who were they? How did they build these pyramids? What is the meaning of the serpent-shadow? And so on. The suggestion is that these are the kinds of mysteries and questions that orient a pilgrimage to Chichén Itzá, and are the basic categories with which pilgrims (and archaeologists) regard the Maya. The final question is "What is the origin of these questions?" The video does not attempt to answer this last question literally, which establishes this project's difference from other anthropological pursuits that deliberately, through objectivist means and rhetoric, seek to account for origins. It is these very questions, and even more importantly the fact that they are unanswerable – that origins are ultimately unfixable – that underlies the creation of meaning. The fact that Quetzil is regularly asked on camera "where are you from?" by other tourists and New Agers, but seems to have a different answer every time (New Jersey, the U.S. Midwest, Houston) confirms his own skepticism toward fixing origins. The point is that the specific meanings people make of the world around them are not, for

example, simply the product of movement through structural positions in a ritual process or their existence in states of perpetual *communitas*, but are the products of partial knowledge, fragmented understandings, and unstable perspectives.

Reforming Visual Anthropology

Certainly, such an argument derives from and speaks to a secular discourse on pilgrimage that seeks to examine and understand it in sociological terms – asking questions about its social dimensions, interpreting its cultural forms – as opposed to a theological appreciation in which the experience of the sacred exists as the central concern. This is not to say that the possibility for an experience of the sacred disappears completely, or that the pilgrim's quest for completeness and wholeness consistently fail in the face of the forces of cultural disjuncture. But in vital ways, religious experience exceeds the visual medium,[25] and Himpele and Castañeda, while wholly committed to an experientially-based methodology and narrative, seem more committed to exploring the methodological implications of the embodied actions and performances of visitors and visiting anthropologists than in finding ways to account for the presence of the sacred.

The video manages performativity on two levels, in one sense offering a conceptual model for social action, in another, an approach to decentering and renewing ethnographic methodology. In the first sense, Chichén Itzá itself represents a large-scale stage upon which various social actors enact their differentiated meanings of the archaeological zone, as we see in the performances of diverse New Age ceremonies, of tourists and tour guides using scripts initially laid out by archaeologists to know how to see the space of the archaeological zone, or of visitors making fun of New Agers by mock-performing their ceremonies. The metaphor of perfomance offers a novel alternative to the supposition that Chichén Itzá and the things taking place there are "socially-constructed." The metaphor of "construction" implies that people or groups of people are building something according to an engineered plan, or providing a skilled realization of an underlying structural blueprint.[26] By moving to the concept of performance (which is still an actor-centered theory of human action), there is an acknowledgement that certain scripts and discourses underlie social action and the creation of meaning from raw experience, but that there is more possibility for fluidity, improvisation, and the practices and interactions of actual bodies. As people enact a specific set of scripts or visions of Chichén Itzá,

they come into both social and physical contact with others engaged in a similar process, creating suggestive possibilities for dialogic encounters and improvisations, as in the case where the woman above realizes the possibility of "something weird…and different" because of her participation in the New Age ritual.

In the second sense, which is more relevant for our purposes here, performativity as embodied action offers a self-reflexive approach to and critique of the processes of fieldwork, visual documentation, and the construction of cultural knowledge more generally. The narrative approaches this theme most directly through the character of Quetzil, who is never distant from, and usually at the center of, the events and conversations taking place on camera. More specifically, it is through Quetzil's concrete experiences of interacting with people in and around the archaeological zone that we gain access to a diversity of perspectives and meanings on the experience of pilgrimage. Our reliance on his willingness (hubris?) to eavesdrop and his ability to enter into and carry on conversations are made explicit in a short section of the film where Himpele's voice-over explains that in doing this collaborative project with Quetzil, he was himself engaging in an ethnography of the latter's ethnographic style. Expanding on the theme of Quetzil-the-fieldworker, they interview a resident of Pisté. As Quetzil looks on, the man describes him as "folkloric," explaining (more to Quetzil than the camera), "You can't not be a gringo in Pisté – you are one! But you are also now more than that. You are a friend of many people, a friend because you understand their difficulties. People appreciate it, and when the people appreicate something, that means it is true, it is authentic." In this view, Quetzil exists in a space of cultural fluidity, who can assure access to many people (especially Pisteños) because he is seen as a sympathetic person who listens, marking him as something more than other visitors to Pisté ("gringos"), but of course, not-quite a Pisteño either.

This sense of contingency and improvisation is precisely the effect the videomakers want to generate, for it forces us to realize that what we are seeing on video is the visual manifestation of fluid social relations and embodied identities of the videomakers themselves. Their identities and markings are both conspicuous and distinct. This is partly related to the fact that, unlike other visitors, they are "making a documentary." By doing so, they attract the attention of other visitors, marking themselves as key participants in helping create and confirm the spectacle that is Chichén Itzá on the day of the equinox. Quetzil is also especially marked by his body, verging on erotic with his skimpy shorts and suggestive tank-top shirts. But their status as ethnographers

is not unproblematic either, as the techniques, attitudes, and performances of ethnography proliferate among visitors to Chichén Itzá. Ethnography is unleashed as tourists listen in on each other, ask questions, try to analyze what is taking place around them. Some people on camera take to this more than others, and often in response to the videomakers themselves explaining what they are up to. The point is that neither Himpele nor Castañeda have a monopoly on doing anthropology, rendering their own professional identities as anthropologists open to negotiability, even competition, with others.

In placing self-reflexivity through performance as a central visual and narrative theme running throughout the video, Himpele and Castañeda are asking us to look at anthropology "behind the scenes," a strategy that represents a challenge to norms of documentary film production where filmaker authority is disembodied and omniscient. Placing the ethnographer in front of the camera marks a difference from a visual discourse that "moves from mind to mind,"[27] rendering visible the affective and embodied aspects of fieldwork, accepting that the creation of cultural knowledge is mediated by these "subjective" processes and is therefore partial and situated. No longer can ethnographic authority rely on its distance from the subject, or an "Us versus Them" dichotomy where there is a basic asymmetry in which "we" stage "them."[28] The point is not simply that "they" also stage "us," but that any division of "us" and "them" is in the first place a product of unquestioned norms of ethnographic and documentary film representations. This reformative methodology is based on a phenomenological principle that embodied action is the basis for both knowledge of self and other.[29] The intention is to force viewers to see the film itself as a representation, instead of unproblematically seeing through the film to the data beyond.[30] At its most suggestive, this can "suspend realism," creating a distinctive tension and blurring between performance and document, the personal and the typical, description and evocation.[31] We can go even farther to suggest that in place of any commitment to a singular notion of truth, there are multiple truths that can only be approached (but not arrived at) through dialectical combinations of strategy and serendipity. Such blurrings, according to Nichols, do not represent "logical confusions," but arenas of ideological contestation and where new interpretive strategies can be explored and gain acceptance.[32]

Performances that Keep on Performing

The question, of course, is how to evaluate such claims. The position of performative documentary is that by representing the decentering and embodied actions of the anthropological subject, there is a corresponding decentering of the subject of visual anthropology and ethnographic documentary film itself. More to the point, it allows for the possibility to "know difference differently," that is, outside of the Othering tendencies inherent in "we-stage-them" asymmetries, without defining in precise terms what that difference is or even should be. Motivating this is also a distinctive take on the "use-value" of documentary, projecting a concern that the value of documentary to both the subjects of the film and the audiences that will view it requires a shift from documentary as a way to know Otherness to documentary as a way to reflect critically on and modify anthropological processes of representation. These reforms confirm that cultural knowledge does not rise out of the social vaccuum of omniscience, but is the product of historical and embodied individuals in specific times and places.

In spite of its explicit disobedience to the traditions of documentary film, though, there is something technically reductionistic and atemporal about the way performative documentary is regarded by advocates like Nichols, a basic assumption being that it can accomplish the radical things it sets out to do largely by force of technique. On several levels, this is based on problematic assumptions. One crucial and persistent conundrum is that as much as anthropology may wish to decenter ethnographic relationships and the creation of cultural knowledge by doing away with the aura of omniscience, the editing room remains the ultimate trump card. On film, anthropologists may allow themselves to be staged, negotiated, challenged, and even rejected. It is also possible to replace the explicit authority of a voice-over narration with the submerged authority of multivocality. But what happens to the collaborations, interactivity, and dialogism in the technical and creative process of editing film clips and sound? Is it possible to truly decenter authorship when recording on film, which is where performativity and bodies are highlighted, is but an early step in a much larger production process that ranges from pre-filming plans and preparations to various stages of post-production? Is this focus on the actual footage of performative ethnographers not just perpetuating another form of structural inequality, since these other processes involve a key shaping of representations from raw footage to finished product? To be fair, the suggestiveness of self-reflexivity through performance in the documentary film genre is not that it means to extend the net of authorship to all participants,

because it is radical enough to identify multiple authors and subjectivities where they have not been admitted before. The goal is to induce viewers to acknowledge that what we see on film is the product of specificity – of lens, intellectual framework, physical body, social relationship, etc. – emphasizing the processes of making representations over the objectivity of facts. But it is worth noting that documentary film's historic commitment to using the world "out there" for purposes of argumentation persists in performative documentary, although instead of assuming the transparency of facts on film, there is invisibility in the framing of the project and editing process, in which film clips and sounds are organized by the author to pursue a particular argument.

Notwithstanding issues of production control, questions arise on another level about the receptivity of audiences to such techniques. In important respects, performative documentary assumes a paradoxical audience, which is to say, both passive and cosmopolitan in its way of viewing film. That is, audiences have to be both open and responsive to the force of certain techniques of filming, but sophisticated enough in the history and subtleties of ethnographic documentary aesthetics and practices that they can comprehend where the lines between ethnographic self and Other, performance and documentary, are being blurred. In terms of this latter argument, there is a sense that even though the genre seeks to overcome "mind-to-mind" communication, the viewer's mind has to stay intact in order to appreciate that fact. Of course, this is an unrealistic position, given that viewers do not come to any films as "cultural blanks."[33] They come as persons who have seen movies that confirm the savagery of the Other, television documentaries with condescending and simplistic visions of traditional cultures as sophisticated yet mysterious, and newspapers and magazine photographs that emphasize the visually exotic in contrast to modern ways of being.

As a result, audiences do not necessarily experience and comprehend films in terms of the intentions laid out by filmakers or critics like Nichols. For example, after showing *Incidents of Travel in Chichén Itzá* to undergraduate and graduate student audiences in American universities at least a dozen times – prepared in advance to be attentive to the self-conscious innovations in the video and its critique of visual anthropology – many still come away with a renewed concept of a savage Other. It is not the Ancient Maya, the typical savage Other around which Chichén Itzá is organized, though. Rather it is the New Agers who are incommensurably Other and exotic, and even mocked by students who watch the video, an effect that is similar to

tourists in the video itself who marginalize the New Agers by reducing their practices to irrelevance or joking. When asked why they laughed at New Agers in the video, some students appear to already have a dismissive attitude toward New Age religions, seeing them as marginal and spurious religious practices. Other students, more inclined to view New Age religions sympathetically, feel betrayed that the video does not defend their practices even if they do not share the same values. In either circumstance, the students have been easily drawn into accustomed ways of viewing documentary that see through the process of representation to the ethnographic "facts" on screen. That the video, which deliberately engages New Agers in a collaborative performance in which the goal is to try to overcome the distance between anthropological objectification and peoples' objectifications of themselves, ends up being interpreted by large numbers of viewers as a send-up of New Age religions suggests that audiences are neither as cosmopolitan nor passive as presumed.

In one significant respect, Castañeda and Himpele appreciate this fact, because they regularly interview audiences about their reactions to the video and its subject matter. This is consistent with one of their arguments, that any totalizing conclusions about Chichén Itzá are impossible given the unfinished and incomplete negotiation of meanings and experiences that take places there. Viewing the video itself engages new participants in the set of negotiations and cultural dialogues over the happenings during the equinox in Chichén Itzá. In this sense, it is possible to think of what takes place in the video as "performances that keep on performing," both in terms of the performances happening on screen and the performative ways audiences engage the video during and after viewing it. But this generates a curiously paradoxical effect in which, even while the video highlights the specificity and temporality of the equinox event, the video itself projects a now atemporal, even timeless, set of performances, events, and interactions that have already taken place. This paradox persists largely because performative documentary cannot escape its own genre completely, which is rooted in procedures of objectification. Even while it aims to represent the decentering of cultural knowledge production, it is still committed to representing the struggles of actual groups of people in service to persuasive arguments about the world. The video's argument may be that we cannot objectively and omnisciently know the heterogeneous cultural realities of particular groups of people or events, but that in itself is an argument that at least partially draws its authority from an atemporal, even universalizing, logic.

Reductionistic attention to images and imagery-making does not necessarily resolve this tension. Perhaps one of the more promising aspects of this genre is that film itself generally requires a normative commitment on the part of viewers, filmmakers, and the subjects of film to not view filmmaking as as a neutral recording practice, but as a site of active dialogue, contestation, and intercultural engagement. But even while inviting dialogue and the staking of positions, Himpele and Castañeda remain agnostic about the sacred and the nature of the pilgrim's engagement with it. It is not a very curious absence, given the unquestioned secularity of the videomaker's own pilgrimage, but it does require us to ask: what would a performative documentary look like if it took seriously the experiential quest for the sacred and its polyvocalities, instead of the polyvocal socio-cultural dynamics surrounding it?

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[2] Ian Reader and Tony Walter. *Pilgrimage in Popular Culture*. (London: MacMillan Press, 1993).
[3] Bill Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).
[4] Ibid.
[5] John Faris, "Anthropological Transparency: Film, Representation and Politics." *Film as Ethnography*, P.I. Crawford and D. Turton, eds. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), pp. 171-82.
[6] Nichols, ibid.
[7] Ibid., p. 79.
[8] Ibid., p. 96.
[9] Ibid., pp. 96-7.
[10] Barry Keith Grant and Jeannette Sloniowski, "Introduction." *Documenting the Documentary: Close Readings of Documentary Film and Video*. Barry Keith Grant and Jeannette Sloniowski, eds. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), p. 20.
[11] Personal communication with Jeff Himpele, 20 July 2002.
[12] Faris, ibid.
[13] John L. Stephens, *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatán*. (New York: Harpers & Brothers, 1841).
[14] Nestor García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), p. 242.

[15] It is important to note that this theoretical argument is one that Castañeda also develops in his ethnographic study of Chichén Itzá: Queztil Castañeda, *In the Museum of Maya Culture: Touring Chichén Itzá*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).
[16] Valene Smith, ed. *Hosts and Guests: The Anthropology of Tourism*, 2nd Edition. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989).
[17] Dennis O'Rourke, *Cannibal Tours* (Los Angeles: Direct Line Cinema, 1987). See also Katharine Young, "Visuality and the Category of the Other." *Visual Anthropology Review* vol. 8, no. 1 (1992), pp. 92-6.
[18] Young, ibid., p. 92.
[19] Smith, ibid.
[20] Luis Vivanco, "Categories of Otherness and Tourism in *Incidents of Travel in Chichén Itzá*." Presentation at Society for Applied Anthropology Annual Meeting (Mérida, Yucatán, March 2001).
[21] Nelson Graburn, "Tourism: The Sacred Journey." *Hosts and Guests: The Anthropology of Tourism*, 2nd Edition, Valene Smith, ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), p. 23.
[22] Reader and Walter, ibid., p. 5.
[23] Ibid., p. 8.
[24] Paulla A. Ebron, "Tourists as Pilgrims: Commercial Fashioning of Transatlantic Politics." *American Ethnologist* vol. 26, no. 4 (1999), pp. 910-932.
[25] Joel Martin, *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth and Ideology in Popular American Film*. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995).
[26] Paul Richards, "Against the Motion (2): Human Worlds are Culturally Constructed." *Key Debates in Anthropology*, Tim Ingold, ed. (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 123.
[27] Nichols, ibid., p. 76.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid., p. 83.
[31] Ibid., p. 97.
[32] Ibid., p. x.
[33] Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckinridge, "Museums are Good to Think: Heritage on View in India." *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture*, Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kreamer, and Steven D, Lavine, eds. (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution), pp. 34-55.