

A + H

NARRATIVE

The fields below are expandable, but must NOT exceed 2 pages. This form must be completed using a word processing program (12 point font, single-spaced, 1" margins).

Project Director:



Objectives

I propose utilizing RSCAP funding to support the development process of a documentary film following the progress of a young indigenous Nahua or Otomi woman in the Sierra Norte mountain village of Pahuatlán del Valle, Mexico as she trains to become a volador and perform in the ritual ceremony of the Danza de los Voladores.

I am in the early phases of researching and developing a feature documentary film based on this concept, and with RSCAP support, I plan to travel to Mexico to develop partnerships with local organizations and universities, to identify a female volador who will consent to participate and be recorded for the film, to identify local women in Pahuatlán to train and hire in film crew roles, and to ultimately shoot test footage and produce a short film that will serve as a proof of concept sample to submit for outside funding support from non-profit organizations and private foundations to help produce the feature length film.

Significance

The Danza de los Voladores ('flying men') is an indigenous fertility ritual, usually associated with the Totonac people in Veracruz, but also practiced in the state of Puebla, home to the village of Pahuatlán and a population of ethnic Nahua and Otomi people. In 2009, the ritual was inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, and some aspects of the ritual are deemed under threat of loss. Only men were allowed to train and perform this ritual in the past. In most of Mexico where the ritual is practiced, it is still taboo for women to participate in the ritual. As a result of the migration of men from Pahuatlán to the United States seeking economic opportunities, women in this small village have been allowed to train and perform to ensure the preservation and continued vitality of this cultural heritage in the region.

In an era of tough rhetoric and political clashes around immigration issues, in particular regard to Mexican immigrants and undocumented Latinx laborers, this is a documentary production that aims to highlight the resilience of the women and family members who stay behind as their men migrate to seek opportunities. As a female filmmaker, I am invested in capturing and sharing stories of women who push boundaries and break rules, and this story is particularly captivating to me. Not only are these women breaking taboos, they are doing it for the larger aim of preserving the vitality of their heritage practices. As a film artist, who makes mostly non-theatrical work, and is invested in capturing lived experiences, the mode of production for this project is significant. The film will be produced in a manner inspired by radical ethnographic filmmaking practices, such as the work of Chick Strand. Strand produced several documentaries in Mexico throughout the 1960s - 1980s, working closely with the people who appear in her documentaries. Our film production crew will be made up of all women, and predominantly women of color. It is my intention to hire and train local Otomi and Nahua women to work in technical crew roles, such as sound recordists and camera operators. Throughout the process of producing and editing the film, I will work closely with the primary female volador who appears in the film as well as the local community to screen work-in-progress edits and shape the film in a collaborative process based on community feedback.

I believe there is potential for this film story to highlight a fresh, unique angle that can help further humanize divisive political issues around immigration. At the heart of the film will be one woman's endurance, self-determination and integrity as she pushes back against boundaries and represents her cultural heritage. I feel there is broad appeal in this story, and it broaches many issues at the center of current events and debate in our national and international politics. At this point in my filmmaking career, I am interested in producing a documentary film that remains artistically expressive, cinematically engaged and produced through analog filmmaking practices as my previous work has been, but has the potential for broader appeal and theatrical screenings for wider audience reach. To make a film on this scale, I will need to access significant funding resources. This film will focus on humanizing timely issues and I believe that it has strong potential for external funding through documentary production funds. Most film funds require some pre-production and test shooting work to be completed, to ensure the viability of the project and to get a sense of the filmmaker's overall aesthetic and ethical approaches. The opportunity to do the initial groundwork of identifying local crew, a key female volador to be the main "character" for the film and build partnerships with organizations and universities in Mexico to support the production will help prove the feasibility of the project to potential major funders. Additionally, having a strong, well-produced short film sample that serves as a proof of concept will be essential in pursuing the external support necessary to produce a feature film that is competitive for national and international film festivals and potentially theatrical release. Part of the life of a film is how it moves through the festival circuit and engages with communities in festival host cities. I anticipate a strong educational engagement component for this film, which will serve to represent SSU in other communities and could potentially help in recruiting future SSU students, particularly in the recently launched Film Studies MA program, where I serve as an affiliate faculty member. I also teach video production coursework in COMS and my work as an active filmmaker crosses into my pedagogy in a multitude of ways.

Plan of Work

I conducted an initial site visit and made some initial contacts in Pahuatlán in 2015, and need to re-visit for two weeks during the 2018 summer break to identify a primary female volador to appear in the film, key events to cover in her trajectory and training as a volador, and identify women who are interested in training and working on the film crew. I will also establish local partnerships with universities, and film festivals in Mexico City that show cinematically engaged documentaries, such as FICUNAM, to help support the production of the film. During this site visit I will conduct test shoots and create initial sample footage so I can begin to seek additional funding. During a second two-week visit in Mexico during the winter break, I will work with a small crew to produce a proof of concept short film following our key female volador. I will develop practices to work collaboratively with the community during the editing of this proof of concept in spring 2019. Throughout the funding period, I will complete pre-production planning, the elements necessary for fundraising applications and connect with local Bay Area organizations that would be appropriate partners for this project.

Student Involvement

I will hire an SSU Film Studies Masters student to serve as a production development assistant, and this student will gain both technical training and in the field production experience via traveling with me to Mexico in summer and winter breaks. They will experience firsthand the challenges of ethical documentary engagement and learn the process of developing a feature film from the earliest stages of pre-production and fundraising. My own professional development experiences for this project will enhance my COMS video production teaching.