Abigail George

Anthropology Student Research Grant Reflection

I received the Student Research Grant in Fall 2018 to continue my thesis research in Sumpango, Guatemala. With the money from the grant I was able to travel to Guatemala and conduct field research for two weeks in January 2019. My thesis is about the political and economic dispossession of indigenous Kaqchikel women in Sumpango. Because it is election season in Guatemala (elections are June 2019), I was able to follow and observe the mayoral campaign of a long-time friend, informant, and Kaqchikel woman in Sumpango. Like Guatemalan national politics, the municipal politics of Sumpango are dominated by Ladino (non-indigenous) men, as such, Sumpango has never had a female indigenous mayor. The woman who is running for mayor does politics very differently from the Ladino men who are infamous for hoarding public funds, bribing voters and electoral fraud. Instead, she insists on campaigning organically with the hard work and volunteered time of other poor, community leaders. I am analyzing post-war, postcolonial democracy and law from below and the gendered and racial dynamics of political engagement.

I was also able to spend time working in the villages surrounding Sumpango. Increasing economic globalization has meant strains on the traditional way of making a living through agricultural work in Sumpango and other Guatemalan highland towns. Furthermore, the gender ideologies are stark in the villages; women wear indigenous clothes while the men wear western clothes, women are expected to take care of children and do unpaid housework, while certain lucrative forms of work (such as cutting down trees) are reserved only for men, many men have alcohol problems while drinking for women is taboo. In response, some Kaqchikel women are forming cooperatives to work together on one another’s plots of land and sell their crops. I was able to spend several days living and working with one of these cooperatives, in which I conducted interviews and made observations regarding their gender ideologies, opinions regarding production and consumption and local politics.