

**International House NY**

**Richard Brown**

*Flashpoint: Kekchi Territory Documentary Series and Conflict Resolution Campaign*

**Alta Verapaz, Guatemala**

*Every language is an old growth forest of the mind, a watershed of thought... To lose a language is to lose a branch of the family tree... Every language, like every culture, deserves to be heard. – Wade Davis.*

*The resistance will continue, even if they kill me, even if they imprison me for however many years. The people who depend on the river for their sustenance, who drink its water, will continue to resist. – [Bernardo Caal](#), incarcerated Kekchi leader and Amnesty International Prisoner of Conscience.*

**Background:** Land and water conflict in Guatemala [is intensifying](#) as local elites and international companies effect land and water grabs for mines, dams, and export crop plantations. This trend has been so dramatic since the 90s that some Maya leaders call it the fourth major invasion of Maya land since the 1500s, as I have [written in \*The Washington Post\*](#) and [EntreMundos](#). Meanwhile, climate change is exacerbating conflict and driving migration by [intensifying drought in the region](#).

Maya communities are responding with peaceful campaigns to protect their livelihoods and lifeways, but, sadly, criminalization and violence against them is increasing. 15-20 indigenous leaders are killed every year. Even as a UN Special Rapporteur visited Guatemala in 2018 to assess the violence, [a wave of killings](#) claimed seven leaders in a matter of weeks. One of them, [Luis Marroquín](#), was a friend I admired.

**The Opportunity:** For my reporting on land and water conflict in Guatemala, I was awarded the Gray Fellowship for International Reporting to attend the Political Reporting M.A. Program at Columbia Journalism School. In addition to tuition assistance, the fellowship awarded me a language grant to study Kekchi Mayan in Guatemala after I graduate. (Half the country, over eight million people, speak a Mayan language, and around 800,000 speak Kekchi.) This grant will allow me to study Kekchi by living with Kekchi community leaders on the front lines of land and water conflict. One of my principal contacts is Chico Tec, who appeared in [this Spanish-language documentary short](#) I produced on threats to the Cahabón River. He is now organizing resistance to an [“epidemic of evictions”](#) of Kekchi communities by powerful business interests.

These leaders and I have long discussed the possibility of co-creating a documentary series to encourage a peaceful resolution to the current crisis and provide a platform – and therefore protection – to the people struggling to defend their land and water. The language grant provides us the perfect opportunity for this collaboration and will cover my expenses. The Davis Projects for Peace grant would provide the funding we need to support a small shooting and editing team and purchase a single specific camera body. The shooting and editing team, as well as the other cameras, lenses, drones, audio equipment, editing software, and computer equipment, will be provided by XarStudio, a Guatemalan documentary production company. XarStudio helped to produce the masterful 2019 documentary [The Feathered Serpent](#) about the quetzal (Guatemala’s national bird), the destruction of its habitat, and efforts to protect it.

**The Documentary:** *Flashpoint: Kekchi Territory* will be broken up into ten shareable 10-minute episodes. First, it will showcase what the communities are fighting to protect: the beauty and value of Kekchi language and culture and Kekchi territory’s ecosystems. I have spent considerable time in beautiful highland jungles with Kekchi families who live in traditional longhouses of thatched roofs, hammocks, and wood stoves. They run Kekchi-language community radio stations and use social media to organize while maintaining ancient spiritual traditions such as fire ceremonies and cave altars. Perhaps best of all, their sense of humor is central to everyday life and we laugh a great deal together.

By highlighting the community's humor as well as the most interesting elements of Kekchi language and worldview that I'll learn through the language grant, *Flashpoint* will explain why an American journalist (myself) would go through the trouble to learn Kekchi. It will illustrate the famous words of Wade Davis at the top of this application (*Every language is an old growth forest of the mind...*) and how Kekchi worldview requires a balanced co-existence with nature that encroaching dams, mines, and plantations are now jeopardizing. The struggle to preserve Kekchi territory and culture will be presented as a microcosm for interlocking global crises: Of the [7,000 languages](#) spoken 50 years ago, over half are likely to disappear in our lifetimes as ethnocide – the destruction of cultures – accelerates in tandem with the destruction of the natural world.

*Flashpoint* will then bring audiences the behind-the-scenes story of the strategies and tactics Kekchi communities use in their peaceful fight for survival, and how international civil society can support a peaceful resolution. Kekchi communities have organized regional votes under ILO Convention 169, which requires that indigenous communities give free, prior, and informed consent to any project that will affect their livelihoods. The Kekchi votes have overwhelmingly rejected various projects, denying this consent, yet many move forward as community leaders are arrested or killed. Communities then begin to block roads and organize demonstrations to attract international support. *Flashpoint* will show how U.S., Canadian, and Spanish companies are involved in these conflicts and how audiences from these countries can lobby these companies for a peaceful resolution. *Flashpoint* will also highlight the severe impacts of climate change in Guatemala and explain how all this drives migration to the U.S.

We aim to air episodes on U.S. streaming platforms or news sites, and if we cannot, we are sure to be able to do so with major Guatemalan news outlets through long-standing working relationships. A leading global educational organization, *Where There Be Dragons*, has committed to promoting the documentary in their partnership network of hundreds of high schools, universities, and community organizations. This ensures tens of thousands of viewers and will make the documentary attractive to media outlets.

**The Conflict Resolution Campaign:** XarStudio and I will create social media accounts for *Flashpoint* and connect audiences directly to the featured communities through social media, live Zoom Q&As, and video exchanges. This is the model I use as the founder and facilitator of the *Forum on Migration*. Through the *Forum*, I connect U.S. students virtually to migrating families and civil society leaders in Central America. Our audience will feel personally connected to the documentary's subjects.

We will use this connectivity to promote conflict resolution. We will help audiences in the U.S., Canada, and Spain join ongoing advocacy campaigns to pressure specific companies from those countries to enter into dialogue with Kekchi communities on equitable access to land and water. The community leaders and I have working relationships with organizations leading such campaigns, like Amnesty International, Cultural Survival (U.S.-based), Rights Action (Canada-based), and Por Causa (Spain-based).

**Indicators of success:** We will film in July, edit in August, and air and campaign in September. Our ultimate aim is to foster renewed, constructive dialogue between Kekchi communities and the companies operating in their territory about equitable access to land and water.

Intermediate indicators of success will be audience engagement and audience participation in advocacy campaigns. Engagement will be measured via attendance at virtual events – like Facebook Live talks, Zoom Q&As, and video exchanges – as well as the subscriptions/follows, views, comments, and shares garnered by the *Flashpoint* Facebook page, Instagram account, and YouTube channel.

Audience participation in advocacy campaigns will be measured in terms of actions taken to support the campaigns of organizations like Amnesty International, Cultural Survival, Rights Action, and Por Causa. These actions will include signing and sharing petitions, contacting elected representatives, attending covid-safe rallies, placing letters to the editor in local papers, fundraising, and recruiting new members.