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# Transnational Indigenous Communities

## The Intellectual Legacy of Michael Kearney

by  
Gaspar Rivera-Salgado

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[Soon after Michael Kearney died in 2009, his family, friends, and colleagues initiated a permanent lectureship in his name at the annual meeting of the Society for Applied Anthropology. The lectureship is intended to carry forward Kearney's commitment to applying careful, systematic thought to the lives of marginalized people, in a format he would have appreciated. Thus, each year a distinguished lecturer is chosen to address some aspect of the themes that were Kearney's life-long interests—migration, transnationalism, human rights, and Marxism. The First Annual Michael Kearney Memorial Lecture was given in Baltimore, MD, on March 29, 2012, by Gaspar Rivera-Salgado and was followed by commentaries by Lynn Stephen from the University of Oregon and Aída Hernández from the Colegio de la Frontera Norte in Mexico City. Carole Nagengast of the University of New Mexico edited the talks of Rivera-Salgado and Stephens for presentation in this issue.]

*Mixtecs are indigenous peoples from the southern Mexican states of the western portion of Oaxaca and small adjacent parts of Puebla and Guerrero. Mixtecs have been coming to the United States since the late 1970s as migrant workers. Michael Kearney became for the Mixtec migrant community in diaspora and in Oaxaca a solid ally and a critical thinker who contributed with his intellect and sometimes plain hard physical labor to the efforts of the Mixtec community to promote the fundamental human rights of all indigenous Mexicans. He played an important role in advancing the struggle of indigenous migrants by forging innovative theoretical concepts that indigenous activists appropriated to focus and advance their struggle, among them transnational indigenous community, Oaxacalifornia, and Mixtec political consciousness. In the late 1980s and early 1990s these concepts appeared strange and abstract to indigenous activists, but eventually they became cornerstones of the discourse of many activists and indigenous organizers both in the United States and Mexico and are now common coin.*

*Los mixtecos son un pueblo indígena de los estados mexicanos de Oaxaca (porción occidental) y pequeñas partes adyacentes de Puebla y Guerrero. Han viajado a los Estados Unidos como trabajadores migrantes desde finales de la década de 1970. Michael Kearney*

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*se convirtió en un aliado sólido y un pensador crítico para la diáspora mixteca y sus allegados en Oaxaca. Contribuyó, con su intelecto y a veces llano y arduo trabajo físico, a los esfuerzos de la comunidad mixteca por promover los derechos humanos fundamentales de todos los indígenas mexicanos. Jugó un papel importante en el avance de la lucha de los migrantes indígenas con innovadores conceptos teóricos luego utilizados por sus activistas, entre ellos la comunidad indígena transnacional, Oaxacalifornia y la conciencia política mixteca. En la década de los ochenta y principios de los noventa estos conceptos parecían extraños y abstractas a los activistas indígenas, pero eventualmente se convirtieron en pilares del discurso de muchos de ellos tanto en Estados Unidos como en México. Ahora son de uso común.*

**Keywords:** *Michael Kearney, Indigenous peoples, Transnational indigenous communities, Indigenous Mexican migrants, Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales*

Mixtecs are indigenous peoples from the southern Mexican states of the western portion of Oaxaca and small adjacent parts of Puebla and Guerrero (the Mixteca). Mixtecs have been coming to the United States since the late 1970s as migrant workers, initially in agriculture but now as workers of various kinds. In 1979 the anthropologist Michael Kearney first encountered Mixtec migrants working in an orange grove not far from the University of California, Riverside, where he taught and did research for 40 years. Michael Kearney, who died in November 2009, became for the Mixtec migrant community in diaspora and in Oaxaca a solid ally and a critical thinker who contributed with his intellect and sometimes plain hard physical labor to the efforts of the Mixtec community to promote the fundamental human rights of all indigenous Mexicans. He played an important role in advancing the struggle of indigenous migrants through the forging of innovative theoretical concepts that indigenous activists appropriated to focus and advance their struggle. He coined key concepts such as *transnational indigenous community* (Kearney, 2000; Kearney and Nagengast, 1989), *Oaxacalifornia* (Kearney, 1995a), and *Mixtec political consciousness* (Kearney, 1988). In the late 1980s and early 1990s these concepts appeared strange and abstract to indigenous activists, though they were early adopted by social scientists. Eventually, however, they became cornerstones of the discourse of many activists and indigenous organizers both in the United States and Mexico, and they are now common coin. Michael was also a major figure of the editorial collective of *Latin American Perspectives* from 1980 until his death and worked closely with the editorial leadership on several issues of the journal. His fellowship and insights were key in maintaining the character and critical edge of the group during the critical period of his participation, often during meetings held at his home.

Michael Kearney was not content with just writing and teaching about indigenous organizers. He wanted to have a direct impact on their struggle. Therefore he became involved in working with organizers and developing organizing strategies that would eventually lead to the formation of some of the most important grassroots organizations formed of Mixtec migrants in California, especially the Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales (Indigenous Front of Binational Organizations—FIOB). He attended endless meetings in the 1980s and 1990s and debated vigorously with strong-minded militant Mixtec

activists. Some of these meetings were held in his own home in Moreno Valley, where he (and his intellectual and life partner, the anthropologist Carole Nagengast) fed and nourished the minds and bodies of a whole generation of Mixtec workers and leaders. This work extended not only throughout the Central Valley and Southern California but also into Tijuana and the Mixteca.

It was a pleasure for me, a former student, an activist in Mixtec community organizing, and a founding member of the FIOB, to witness the way Michael would light up the room with his kind and jovial face. He had a sympathetic and generous demeanor that would disarm the most aggressive opponent with an out-of-the-blue joke or a remark in Mixteco (the language of the Mixtec people). He was also able to span many different intellectual and practical borders in his own work—in English, Spanish, or Mixteco. This showed in his appreciation of the *other*, in his respectful treatment of the diverse groups of people that were part of his world (a world that included many Mixtec migrants but also refugees from other Latin American countries, students, and a host of others drawn from all walks of life). He could deliver solid, illuminating testimony as an expert witness in a court case involving a monolingual Mixtec migrant and also reach out to community leaders or share a *carne asada* with his *compadres* from San Jerónimo de Progreso.

In addition, Michael was always reminding indigenous leaders of the importance of learning from the experiences of others. Of all his many contributions to the struggles of indigenous peoples, perhaps the most important was his advice to organizers to keep in mind the balance between refusing to live their lives as victims and never allowing themselves to become victimizers of others. The way Michael lived his life was a potent lesson that this could be achieved only by the constant care of the other—by the regular reminder that the other, the poor, and the marginalized deserve as much as anyone else to live their lives with the expectation and opportunity of fulfilling their dreams. Mixtec workers and activists of the present generation can claim this legacy for themselves and for the world. ¡Hasta siempre, amigo Michael!

A beautifully evocative paragraph toward the end of Kearney's introduction to *Reconceptualizing the Peasantry* (2006: 13) tells of a family of Mixtecs living on the Kearney/Nagengast property in a rapidly developing but then still rural suburb of Riverside:

Looking down from where we live on a hill we see spread before us a sea of new roofs. And turning our gaze to the fields and trees below we see where two Mixtec "peasant" families have borrowed some land from us to live on for awhile. The arrangement is reciprocal; they put us up when we go to their town in Oaxaca. The men of these seemingly very traditional peasant people from highland Mesoamerica are away at the moment working as roofers, constructing in a very literal sense the new social space that is engulfing us. The musical tonality of Mixtec language comes up to where we, the ethnographers, stand. The children of these roofers are playing, and their wives are working at handicrafts, which they will sell in the parking lots of the local shopping malls. Clearly, we and our visitors/neighbors share a historical moment that defies conventional anthropological categories. But it is not the case that we and they are marginal but that all of us, albeit in different ways, are assuming complex and interpenetrating identities. It is to be expected that these contemporary identities and the conditions that shape them should be reflected in anthropological thought.

As he pointed out, grasping the momentous changes that the migration of indigenous peoples brings to our understanding of basic categories such as “indigenous,” “peasant,” “national,” and “transnational” requires rethinking the assumed “nature” of what Eric Wolf (1957) called “closed corporate communities,” apparently isolated and discretely bounded indigenous villages. Kearney’s recognition has practical implications for migrants themselves and for the applied anthropologist who would be participant in migrant efforts to carve out a civil and political space for themselves both in their communities of origin and in the United States. First, Kearney’s work helps inform potential migrant strategies through which indigenous activists can bolster their capacity for self-representation. Second, migrant recognition of both their own diversity and their sameness is crucial as they broaden and deepen coalitions with other social actors.

As indigenous migrants build new lives in places distant from their homelands, it is important to them that they remain who they are and remember where they came from. Meeting this challenge may give them the opportunity to achieve the long-cherished goal of being “equal to all other peoples, while recognizing the right of all peoples to be different, to consider themselves different, and to be respected as such” (UN, 2007: 1). Indigenous migrants’ organizational initiatives have been integral in furthering this aim.

Kearney also wrote in *Reconceptualizing the Peasantry* that “the essence of political opposition based on ethnicity is a struggle for recognition and concessions gained on the basis of some degree of autonomy that is won from the otherwise totalizing power and authority of the state to assign identity, as, for example, in the form of citizenship and nationality” (2006: 180; see also Kearney, 1991). In other words, the awareness—indeed, the construction—of one’s cultural identity and past is a fundamental condition for the struggle of self-determination (Nagengast and Kearney, 1990). In this observation a crucial link is made between ethnic identity as a self-conscious creation and the struggle for human and labor rights among indigenous Mexican migrants laboring outside their traditional homelands. Kearney also observed that Mixtecs’ sense of their ethnic identity only “began to emerge . . . in the late 1970s and early 1980s. This occurred not in the Mixtec heartland in Oaxaca but instead in the commercial agricultural enclaves of northwest Mexico, in urban shantytowns of the border area, and in California” (Kearney, 1996: 178; see also Kearney, 1988; Nagengast and Kearney, 1990). In this article, I shall explore certain implications of the link between Oaxacan indigenous peoples’ ethnic self-identification and their struggle for human and labor rights, especially as embodied in pan-Oaxacan and increasingly in pan-indigenous organizations. I shall also examine the dialectics of home and migration. My data are drawn from my own research and that of others with both Mixtecs and Zapotecs, another large Oaxacan indigenous group whose members have been migrating for at least as long as Mixtecs.

## TRANSNATIONAL APPROACHES TO MIGRATION

Michael Kearney’s early writings on transnationalism marked the emergence of scholarly attention to the formation of transnational communities

(Kearney, 1986a; 1986b; 1988; Kearney and Nagengast, 1989). His writings have furthered our understanding of transnational action, community building, and the formation of transnational political communities in the United States, Mexico, and the Caribbean. Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton-Blanc (1993: 7) defined “transnationalism” broadly as “the process by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement.” The concept as Kearney used it has two relevant dimensions. The first is its geographic sense, referring to phenomena such as migration, commerce, and communication that cross national borders. The second is the notion of transforming and transcending the nation-state as a modern social and cultural form. At the heart of the transnational approach to international migration is the argument that the current restructuring of global capital produces a new set of political, economic, and social relations between sending communities and governments and citizens abroad. In this view, migration represents “a movement across a significant *border* that changes *identity*, and lets us examine the relationship among borders, orders, and identities” (Kearney, 2004: 141).

Central to the perspective advanced by Kearney is the formation of transnational communities. Kearney (2004: 143) described Mixtec transnational communities (TNCs) as communities that

span the border. In addition to primary communities in Oaxaca, Mixtec TNCs also contain numerous daughter communities in central and north-western Mexico, and in the United States—especially in agricultural areas of California and the south-eastern United States. Households and individuals move among all the communities of the greater TNCs in complex patterns of economic, social, cultural, and biological reproduction deployed at multiple sites on both sides of the [U.S.-Mexico] border.

The emphasis is on the fact that migrants remain heavily involved in the life of their country of origin even though they no longer permanently live there. Transnational social relations thus allow migrants to develop and maintain multiple relations in more than one nation-state (Kearney, 1995b; 2001; 2002). The case of indigenous Mexican migrants points to the need to examine the way migrant identity reflects shifting power relations in both communities of origin and destination. Although ethnic identity is frequently ignored in the literature on transnationalism or treated as a consequence of migration “flows”—a problem “here” but not “there” (Kearney and Nagengast, 1989; Levitt, 2001; Zabin et al., 1993)—Nagengast and Kearney (1990) argued that indigenous migrants, such as Mixtecs and Zapotecs, struggle to construct cultural and ethnic identities in the United States and resist incorporation into the racial hegemony of a bipolar (black-white) system.

Indigenous migrants participate in a rich cultural exchange between the United States and Mexico by bringing back to their communities of origin commodities, styles, and attitudes acquired in the North. Paradoxically, migrants’ presence in the U.S. labor market also reinforces what appear to be quite “traditional” practices at home (Kearney, 2001). For example, traditional fiestas, which are central to the integration of indigenous communities, have not only been perpetuated but also made more elaborate when celebrated in the North.

Further, it is not uncommon for migrant workers who have done relatively well in the North to volunteer or to be appointed or elected to serve in their Oaxacan communities of origin as *mayordomos* (sponsors) of festivities that celebrate the local patron saint. The expenses for these festivities can run into the thousands of dollars and are paid by the relatives of the main *mayordomo*. Large numbers of migrant families living permanently or working temporarily in the United States return to Oaxaca during these celebrations, infusing even more money into them and adding to the excitement of these events (Kearney, 2002).

## IDENTITY AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN THE AMERICAS

Migrants from all Latin American countries have certain common experiences both at home and as migrants and both as individuals and as collectives. Cultural identity for indigenous Latin Americans is both individual—determined by *ombligo* (umbilical cord) (Tibón, 1981)—and collective. Only with a collective consciousness can people demand collective rights (e.g., the right to be recognized as a people) in addition to individual rights (e.g., the right to free speech and religion) (UN, 2007). The survival of indigenous peoples as peoples throughout the Americas has long been at risk as a legacy of centuries of poverty, discrimination, genocide, and (only apparently more benign) assimilation, all of which destroy or attenuate collective consciousness. An account of the historical context and the specific politics and economics of the migratory context and experience will help the reader understand the ways in which migrants construct cultural identities and meaningful lives in situations not of their own choosing (Nagengast, Stavenhagen, and Kearney, 1992).

The past and the future of many Latin American nations can be seen in the faces of the tens of thousands of indigenous people who each year set out on their journey to the large cities of their own countries as well to the United States. Kearney's transnational lens helps bring these faces into focus and allows a way to understand some basic changes in Latin American societies in recent decades. On the one hand, scholars increasingly recognize Mexico, El Salvador, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia, to name just a few, as countries of emigrants, societies from which people migrate in large numbers and whose fates therefore are intimately linked with the economies, cultures, and societies to which their diaspora extends. On the other hand, experiences specific to *indigenous* emigrants require that we understand that many Latin American countries are multiethnic, with large indigenous populations that often have different experiences both in their homelands and as migrants.

Latin American political classes have largely embraced neoliberalism as a political, economic, and even cultural model. This model does not give pride of place to indigenous rights. Political elites sometimes bow to popular and domestic political pressure by placing indigenous rights on national agendas, but thus far few such agendas have been even partially realized anywhere. Because the majority of Latin American indigenous people still live in small villages and depend on agriculture, their livelihoods are highly sensitive to governmental policies with regard to that sector. Since the 1980s, various governments of Latin American states have abandoned what had already been on-again/off-again commitments to making family farming economically

viable (Fox, 1992). Since then “peasant” agriculture has been a target of state welfare policy rather than production support, a shift that has weakened the economic base of indigenous (as well as other peasant) communities. As a consequence, throughout Latin America, official figures indicate that poverty increased in 30 percent of the predominantly indigenous communities between 1990 and 2002 (Hall and Patrinos, 2006; Serrano, Embriz, and Fernández, 2003). The long-term crisis of peasant economies has been further exacerbated since 2000 by the persistent decline and even in some cases the collapse of the international price of coffee, which is the principal cash crop for many of Latin America’s indigenous farmers (see Oxfam, 2002). This has meant, among other things, that more and more indigenous people and peoples are either domestic or international migrant workers. Whatever the intentions of elites, neoliberal theory and practice do not include an independent role for indigenous migrants other than that they join the urban and agro-export workforce at whatever level their skill set and indigenous identity permit. In other words, they are subject to the labor market with all that that market entails in terms of opportunity but also in terms of racist and exploitative labor practices.

In Mexico, since 1994 when the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) entered into force, rural development strategies have been based on the explicit assumption that a large proportion of the rural poor would move to large cities or the implicit supposition that they would migrate to the United States. Indigenous migrants in cities face racism and discrimination and are excluded from the “mainstream”—economically, socially, and politically—first as migrants from rural areas and secondly as indigenous people. On both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border, they can find work only in ethnically segmented labor markets that relegate them to the bottom rungs where the pay is poor and the working conditions are worse (Zabin et al., 1993). In the social sphere, in addition to the well-known obstacles that confront international migrants, especially those without documentation, they also face entrenched racist attitudes and discrimination from Spanish-speaking *mestizo*<sup>1</sup> populations as well as from the dominant white society (Kearney, 1995a; Zabin et al., 1993).

In the civic-political arena, most indigenous migrants are excluded from full citizenship rights, no matter where they reside. On the one hand, the U.S. government resists proposals to regularize the status of millions of workers. On the other hand, even to this day the Mexican government has yet to comply either with the 1996 constitutional reform that recognized migrants’ right to vote in Mexico or with the 1996 San Andrés Accords on Indigenous Rights and Culture, which had promised a modest form of indigenous autonomy. In addition, the lack of effective absentee ballot provisions also prevents many migrants who remain in Mexico but not in their home communities from voting. In the less tangible arena of the dominant national political culture, political elites and working-class people have long seen both indigenous peoples and migrants as less than full citizens and, in some cases, less than full human beings. Only recently has this powerful historical legacy of government neglect and policy that effectively if not deliberately disadvantage or disenfranchise indigenous people been challenged by the formation of indigenous support groups and by increasing massive mobilizations of indigenous peoples.

Few indigenous communities anywhere still wait for the governments of the nation-states in which they live to remedy the past or deliver on sometimes



long-promised but never realized equality before the law or individual and collective rights and freedoms. In the absence of such legal frameworks, many indigenous communities are seizing upon new ways of practicing community autonomy. Kearney's cumulative work shows that Oaxacan indigenous communities have adapted some of their so-called traditional practices to fight for and codify their collective rights on both sides of the border, insuring their own survival as peoples in the face of neoliberalism and the globalization of the past four decades (Kearney, 1994). This is especially true of communities that have experienced geographic dispersal due to national and international migration. Indigenous peoples bring from their Oaxacan villages to their new communities in the United States a wide range of experiences with collective action for community development, social justice, and political democratization, and these repertoires influence their decisions about whom to work with and how to build their own organizations whatever they happen to be.

### REFRAMING MEXICAN MIGRATION AS A MULTIETHNIC PROCESS

The case of Mexico's indigenous peoples, accounting for approximately one-quarter of the continent's indigenous population, is of primary importance to an understanding of demographic trends in that population. Mexico's 13.4 million indigenous people speak 62 languages and represent at least 13 percent of the country's population, according to the government's relatively strict criterion of identity as indigenous language use. (The 2000 national census allows for ethnic self-identification for the first time.) Despite five centuries of pressure to assimilate, at least 1 in 10 Mexicans reports speaking an indigenous language at home (CONAPO, 2007; Robles, Hernández, and Godinez, 2007). Peru, Guatemala, Bolivia, and Ecuador have the next-largest indigenous populations (in percentage of the whole), and the indigenous population in these countries is also growing.

Interestingly, the sizes of individual indigenous language groups in Mexico do not correlate with migration, especially migration to the United States. Until the late 1990s, Mexico's two largest indigenous ethnolinguistic groups, the Nahuatl and the Maya, did not cross the border in large numbers.<sup>2</sup> In contrast to the predominance of Mixtecs and Zapotecs from Oaxaca among migrants to Baja California and the United States, 27 percent of migrants to Mexico City are of Nahuatl origin and 17 percent are Hñahñu (Otomí).<sup>3</sup> However, as the neoliberal economic and social dynamics that encourage migration spread more deeply throughout the Mexican countryside, indigenous people who do not have a long history of migration outside of their regions are now coming to the United States.<sup>4</sup> For example, Mayas from Yucatán and Chiapas are found working in California and Texas, Hñahñus and Nahuats from central Mexico are coming to the American Midwest and Texas, and Mixtecs from Puebla are settling in the New York area, followed more recently by Hñahñus from neighboring Veracruz.<sup>5</sup> Mixtecs and Nahuats are also coming to the United States from Guerrero, a Mexican state whose migration patterns have received little research attention so far (but see Boruchoff, 1999; García Ortega, 2002). Newer indigenous migrants have experiences and organizing traditions different from

those of Oaxacans. To improve our understanding of new groups and their regions of origin and settlement, researchers will need to broaden the exchange between those who study indigenous communities and those who study migration, as well as between those who focus on domestic and those who focus on international Mexican migration.<sup>6</sup>

Until the 1970s most Mexican migrants to the United States had certain common characteristics, since they came primarily from rural communities in the central-western part of the country. The vast majority were culturally mestizos (and spoke Spanish as their first language) until the earliest Mixtecs and Zapotecs began arriving in California and then Arizona and elsewhere. Until about 1995, indigenous Mexican migrants to the United States were mostly from these two groups. However, the Mexican migrant population has since diversified dramatically both socially and geographically. Its regions of origin now include more states as well as large cities. Escala-Rabadán, Bada, and Rivera-Salgado (2006) have observed that the Los Angeles area now has federations of hometown associations from at least 13 Mexican states, and 11 statewide federations are active in Chicago. Regions of migrant settlement in the United States are becoming similarly diverse. In 2003 Mexican researchers found license plates from 37 U.S. states along the main road of San Juan Mixtepec, a community in the Mixteca to which migrants regularly return temporarily for family reasons and to fulfill ritual obligations (Besserer, 2003).<sup>7</sup>

The indigenous migrant population to the United States from Mexico is also becoming increasingly multiethnic. Some indigenous peoples have decades of experience with migration to the United States dating to the Bracero Program (1942–1964), among them the P'urépechas of Michoacán and Oaxaca's Mixtecs and Zapotecs. The Bracero Program also recruited some Nahuas, as is revealed in an account of a rare (successful) strike by braceros in the late 1950s (Ramírez Cuevas, 2003). As one participant reported, "We spoke in *mexicano* [Náhuatl] and they didn't understand us, that's how we were able to organize even though it was prohibited, and we fought for fair pay. We did the strike in *mexicano*."

Many Mexican indigenous groups have formed satellite communities in the United States, a key precondition for organizing along hometown lines (Kearney, 2000; Levitt, 2001; Nagengast and Kearney, 1990), but not all migrants have done so and even fewer have formed ethnic, regional, or panethnic organizations. Some indigenous migrants organize as members of ethnically mixed groups, whether along religious lines, as in the case of New York's Tepeyac Association (Rivera-Sánchez, 2004), or along class lines, as in the case of Oregon's Northwest Treeplanters and Farmworkers United (Sifuentes, 2010; Stephen, 2004) or Florida's Coalition of Immokolee Workers (Payne, 2000).<sup>8</sup> Indigenous migrant organizations also vary in terms of their interest in collaborating with other kinds of groups, whether other ethnic groups or U.S.-focused civic, political, and social organizations. In Los Angeles, for example, the Oaxacan Federation works closely both with other Mexican organizations and with trade unions and civil rights organizations on issues such as access to driver licenses for undocumented workers (Rivera-Salgado and Escala-Rabadán, 2004).

Because of cultural, political, and language differences between groups of indigenous Mexicans, any efforts to communicate or build coalitions among these groups must take linguistic, ethnic, and national differences into account. Advocacy by U.S. groups on behalf of indigenous migrants faces major challenges in terms of building trust and cross-cultural communication. In spite of the success noted above, some incipient cross-sectoral coalition-building efforts have not coalesced, leading to some skepticism among organizers and migrants as well as suggesting the need for greater mutual understanding to facilitate the process of finding the common ground needed to sustain balanced multicultural coalitions.

### THE EXPERIENCE OF OAXACAN INDIGENOUS MIGRATION

Historically, most indigenous migrants came to the United States on a temporary basis, returning home each year to visit family and tend crops. The first travels of indigenous Oaxacan villagers in search of employment (apart from those associated with the Bracero Program) began in the 1930s, taking them to Oaxaca City, the sugarcane fields of Veracruz, and the growing neighborhoods in Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl on the periphery of Mexico City. Then labor contractors supplying agribusinesses in the northwestern Mexican state of Sinaloa began recruiting, especially in the Mixteca. These south-to-north migrations later extended to the San Quintín Valley in northern Baja California. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, indigenous migrants reached farther north, to California, Oregon, and Washington. Migration from Oaxaca intensified at the end of the 1980s with the extensive incorporation of Zapotecs into urban services and Mixtecs into farm labor, often in the most difficult and lowest-paid jobs.

Early migrants were able to regularize their status and settle in the United States after the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act. This permitted millions to move up in the labor force, obtaining better-paying jobs, sometimes even with benefits and full-time status. This left open the bottom rungs of the economic ladder for newer indigenous migrants, who were quick to take the irregular, low-paying piecework jobs that were the most difficult and paid the least (Zabin et al., 1993). Employers of low-wage workers have since proved willing to continue to encourage ethnic segmentation in labor markets as a way of keeping their costs down (Lopez, 2011). The increased risk and cost of crossing the border without documents after about 1990 (because of new U.S. border control policies) effectively curtailed the circular migration of many, causing more migrants to settle in the United States for the long term, becoming in effect immigrants. This was possible for them in part because their networks had matured and they could easily find relatives and fellow villagers or linguistic affiliates in many locales throughout the American Southwest and now increasingly far beyond.

By 2010, an estimated 165,000 Mixtecs worked in agriculture in California's Central Valley (Mines, Nichols, and Runsten, 2010), and 75,000 to 80,000 Zapotecs had settled in Los Angeles, mainly in the central neighborhoods of Koreatown, Pico Union, and South Central (Edward Kissam, personal communication, 2011). The proportion of predominantly indigenous migrants from

southern Mexico in California farm labor about tripled during the 2000s, from 6.1 percent (1993–1996) to 20 percent (2005–2010).

The parallel process of long-term settlement and geographic concentration has led to the creation of a critical mass of indigenous Oaxacans, especially in California. This has permitted the emergence of distinctive forms of social organization and cultural expression, especially among Mixtecs and Zapotecs. Their collective initiatives—the formation of formal binational organizations that maintain very close ties to their home village religious and local governmental institutions in Oaxaca—allow them to draw on ancestral cultural legacies to build U.S. branches of their home communities. Their public expressions of cultural identity range from building civic-political organizations to the public celebration of ancestral religious holidays, basketball tournaments involving dozens of teams, the regular mass celebration of traditional music and dance festivals such as the Guelaguetza,<sup>9</sup> and the formation of village-based bands, some of which return to play in their Oaxacan hometown fiestas.<sup>10</sup> Cultural and political projects also include the revival of traditional weaving workshops, the publication of binational newspapers, indigenous- and Spanish-language radio programs, and efforts to provide translation services and preserve indigenous languages, as well as the emergence of writers and visual artists with cross-border sensibilities (Fox and Rivera-Salgado, 2004).

These processes of invention and reinvention of identity have had social, cultural, and civic impacts in the United States and in Mexico. In particular, the creation and re-creation of collective ethnic identities by indigenous migrants influence their economic, social, and political relationships in the United States.

### TRANSNATIONAL POLITICAL ACTION

Our understanding of the relationship between migration, collective action, and the formation of ethnic identities has been greatly influenced by the research of Michael Kearney. Racist discrimination and exclusion, both in northern Mexico and in the United States, though not completely new for Oaxacan indigenous people, were sharpened in the agricultural fields of Sinaloa, the San Quintin Valley, other parts of Baja California, and California's San Joaquin Valley. Vividly represented by widespread mestizo use of derogatory terms such as *oaxaquitas* (little Oaxacans) and *indios sucios* (dirty Indians), this process of racialization led to a new ethnic identity for many migrants. Not only did their experiences intensify their sense of ethnic difference but migration into a new social context generated a new, broader ethnic identity that brought together migrants from communities that would not necessarily have shared identities back in Oaxaca (e.g., as Mixtecs, Zapotecs, or *indígenas* rather than only the inhabitants of this village or that). "This experience of discrimination outside of Oaxaca was a major stimulus for indigenous migrants to appropriate the labels . . . that formerly had only been used by linguists, anthropologists, and government officials, and to put them to work in organizing along ethnic lines" (Michael Kearney, personal communication, July 2003).<sup>11</sup>

Michael Kearney and Carole Nagengast saw this process of *re-Indianization* of Oaxacan indigenous farmworkers as a result of the incorporation of the Mixteca into a capitalist agro-export processing zone that extended from northern Mexico into California and Oregon. The effects of the extreme exploitative conditions endured by indigenous farmworkers both in Mexico and in the United States gave rise to novel ethnic identities tied to their struggle. Nagengast and Kearney (1990: 80–81) wrote:

It is ironically in these conditions in the north, far from their homeland, that Mixtecs are discovering that they are indeed Mixtec. A new political consciousness and activism coalesced into an emerging pan-Mixtec ethnic identity, an ethnic awareness that transcends commune and even district identification and manifests itself in the form of Mixtec associations and labor-union activity in the border area of the Californias and Sonora and in Oregon. This new identity as Mixtecs, which was latent in the Mixteca, has become the raw material for new cultural, ideological, and substantive resources in altered circumstances. Significantly, this new elaboration of ethnicity is also causing Mixtecs to become the target of political and economic repression as Mixtecs.

The same applied to Zapotecs, of course, as well as other more recent arrivals.

Kearney (1991: 62) argued that the rise of this new sense of ethnic identity among indigenous farmworkers had a larger impact as a social process: “Mixtec ethnicity rises as an alternative to nationalist consciousness and as a medium to circumscribe not space, but collective identity precisely in those border areas where nationalist boundaries of territory and identity are most contested and ambiguous.” The newly appropriated ethnic identities that emerged in the process of migration created new opportunities for collective action that were expressed through the emergence of a diverse array of civic and political organizations in the United States and northern Mexico. These organizations differed from those in the communities of origin, where cross-community solidarity was often blocked by persistent legacies of intervillage conflict. Kearney argued that workers from communities that might have been rivals in Oaxaca came to develop a sense of solidarity through their shared experiences of class and racial oppression as migrants. The resulting pan-Mixtec, pan-Zapotec, and, later, panindigenous Oaxacan identities made possible broader panethnic organizing among migrants for the first time.

The resulting civic, social, and political organizations are notable for the diversity of their strategies and goals. Two main kinds of organizations stand out. The first is the hometown association, known in Spanish as the *organización de pueblo*, the *club de oriundos*, or the *club social comunitario*. It is composed of migrants from a specific Mexican community who come together mainly to support that community, notably by raising funds for local public works in Mexico such as road or bridge building, water systems, electrification, or public spaces such as town squares, sports fields, schools, churches, or community halls (Rivera-Salgado and Escala-Rabadán, 2004). The second is a coalition that draws on hometown, “translocal” ties but brings together people from a regional ethnogeographic sphere. The most consolidated coalitions in the United States that I know of are the Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales (FIOB), the Organización Regional de Oaxaca (ORO), the Unión

de Comunidades Serranas de Oaxaca (UCSO), the Coalición de Comunidades Indígenas de Oaxaca (COCIO), the Red Internacional Indígena de Oaxaca (RIIO), and the Federación Oaxaqueña de Comunidades Indígenas en California (FOCOICA), whose affiliates include most Oaxacan organizations in that state (Fox and Rivera-Salgado, 2004).

Both kinds of organizations create spaces within which indigenous migrants in the United States engage in collective action and cultural sustenance and in which social identities are created and re-created through the institutionalization of collective practices. Migrants recognize themselves and are recognized by others as Oaxacans and as indigenous people. Their collective practices generate discourses that ratify specific cultural, social, and political identities. They call the real and imagined space in which they develop these practices “Oaxacalifornia” or “Oaxa-oregon” or “Oaxa-nuevajersey.” It is a transnationalized space in which migrants bring together their lives in the United States with their communities of origin.

The FIOB, originally the Frente Mixteco-Zapoteco Binacional and one of the earliest of these organizations, is now made up of representatives of Zapotec, Mixtec, Triqui, and P’urépecha indigenous communities and has grown to about 5,000 members spread on both sides of the U.S.-Mexican border. It has offices in Fresno, Santa Maria, and Los Angeles, in Tijuana, and in Juchitán and Huajuápan de León and sponsors a wide range of activities including the Guelaguetza, political activism relating to immigrants’ rights and the political events in Mexico and the United States, and social services to the migrant community. The incorporation of many different indigenous groups into the FIOB illustrates how international migration patterns are changing. Of the six elected leaders of the FIOB’s Baja California branch, one is Mixtec from Guerrero and one is P’urépecha from Michoacán. This shift from a pan-Oaxacan frame to a broader panindigenous one is reflected in the organization’s current name (Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales).

Another striking feature of indigenous workers’ transnational activism is their active participation in the local political life of their communities in Mexico even when they are not physically present. Their political participation both strengthens and transforms their hometown communities’ cultural and social resources, including traditional forms of self-government, such as the *cargo* system, leadership accountability to popular assemblies, and strong corporate community political identity. The ideas and practices indigenous migrants bring from the United States to Oaxaca are in fact remolded in the context of the home community, and traditional community practices have been adapted to the transnational context. During my fieldwork in California (1998–present) I have met many Mixtecs who had been summoned back to their natal communities to perform offices to which they had been elected by the local community assembly. Often, these migrants had been absent from their natal communities for many years.

In response to the many citizens who are absent from Mixtec or Zapotec home communities either permanently or for long periods of time, many home communities have incorporated migrant *paisanos* into the local political process by redefining, through votes in their community assemblies, their concept of citizenship and community. According to this redefinition migrants who not

live in the communities do not necessarily sever ties with it and, if they wish, may enjoy the same rights and obligations as residents. Mixtec communities enforce strict regulations for community membership. Community members, whether migrants or not, have to fulfill strict requirements, which include their physical presence to perform political or religious office. Failure to do so incurs severe penalties including the confiscation of land and other property. Zapotec communities have a rather more flexible notion of citizenship. Zapotecs do not have to return physically to Oaxaca to serve their cargos but may pay someone to carry out their responsibilities for them. Another major difference is that Zapotec sanctions for noncompliance are more symbolic than those of Mixtecs. Being a *ciudadano al corriente* (citizen in good standing) of a Mixtec or Zapotec community does not necessarily bring material rewards to migrants. On the contrary, it involves investing a substantial amount of money in the form of unpaid labor on community projects (*tequio*) or the payment of dues in hard currency (*cooperaciones*) in addition to serving cargos.

Oaxacans now refer to their communities broadly as including both local people and those dispersed along the route that extends to northern Mexico and on to the United States. Thus, through the constant movement of migrants back and forth and the concurrent flow of information, money, goods, and services, the communities of origin and their various "satellite communities" have become so closely linked that in a sense they form a single transnational community.

The political activism of Mixtecs and Zapotecs in California and people's ability to participate in their hometown political processes directly challenges the hegemony of the Mexican state in determining the boundaries of the "national political community" and the rights that its members can enjoy (Kearney, 1991). It is impossible to imagine how the Mexican state and federal governments could regulate the elections in Oaxaca's 570 municipalities and hundreds of small villages every four years. For example, the Mixtec municipality of Juxtlahuaca is composed of 78 *agencias municipales* (villages) and *agencias de policia* (hamlets), the smallest political organizational units in Mexico. Each of these *agencias* elects its own council of representatives according to its customs and traditions. In other words, it is not the Mexican state that determines where a Mixtec migrant "political" community begins or ends. Each indigenous community has historically defined, redefined, and now—largely by incorporating thousands of migrants—expanded its contours.

The ability of Mixtec and Zapotec communities to adapt their political and cultural capital to transnational migration is closely related to the high degree of autonomy they have historically exercised in regulating their internal affairs. In this sense, autonomy is understood as "the right to exercise collectively the free determination of indigenous peoples" (Regino, 1996: 2). The ability of communities to regulate their affairs is of great importance for those with a high rate of out-migration. Mixtec indigenous communities have reversed what had been seen by some social scientists as a catastrophe for their long-term survival—extremely high rates of out-migration—and transformed it into a source of synergy that ensures their cultural, social, and economic reproduction (Kearney, 1995a; Rivera-Salgado, 2000). This synergy is illustrated by their

involvement in the 2006 Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca (Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca—APPO) movement.

In 2006, a conflict arose between teachers and the governor of Oaxaca over wages, working conditions, and education reform in Oaxaca. It was centered in Oaxaca City, the state capital. The spontaneously created APPO, a coalition of over 300 organizations, emerged to confront the state-sponsored teachers' union and other organs of the state. According to Stephen (2009), the creation of the APPO inspired hundreds of thousands of people, providing new models and mechanisms for social change. Through organized marches and tactical takeovers of state government and media facilities, the APPO interrupted the usual functions of Oaxaca City and the state government for six months. However, the Mexican federal police force intervened in November of 2006, shutting down much of the movement and arresting and imprisoning hundreds of people.

Confronted by federal government manipulation of information and the government of the state, the FIOB participated actively in the APPO, taking advantage of new technologies to generate its own communication network through the use of the Internet, cellular phones, and Internet-based video. Protests in Oaxaca City grew and encompassed many groups, some of them indigenous. On June 14, 2006, the state of Oaxaca responded with violence: helicopters flew over the city dropping tear gas, and troops stormed the encampments of peaceful protesters throughout the city (Stephen, 2007: 3):

From June 14 through December 10, 2006, the social conflict in Oaxaca resulted in 17 deaths, 450 prisoners, almost 30 people who are disappeared and many people who have been wounded. From November 25 through December 4 at least 192 people were taken prisoner in round-ups by the *Policía Federal Preventiva* (PFP), primarily in Oaxaca City. There were 46 women prisoners among those detained.

Incensed by the violence perpetrated by the state against the people of Oaxaca, indigenous immigrants and migrants in the United States raised their voices and were joined by other progressive organizations. For example, FIOB members in Los Angeles and other Oaxaqueños from communities throughout Southern California took part in marches and protests that ended at the Mexican consulate in Los Angeles (Stephen, 2009). The mobilization started with just a few people, but the FIOB began bringing media attention to the protests, and they were soon being covered by newspapers, radio, and local television. One of the largest marches included more than 500 people who walked from the St. Thomas church in Koreatown to the Mexican consulate, 2.5 miles away.

The participation of the U.S. immigrant community in the strikes in Oaxaca grew to the point that in one assembly immigrants decided to create APPO Los Angeles. As part of the strategy, they maintained phone contact with the leaders of APPO Oaxaca, who kept them updated on the situation in Oaxaca. The U.S.-based migrants demonstrated their solidarity through these communications by joining in chanting slogans of solidarity over the phone. Some of those present shouted the slogans through tears. The Los Angeles demonstrations



were accompanied by bands from the Oaxacan indigenous towns playing traditional songs such as the *Canción Mixteca* (for many the official anthem of Oaxacan immigrants). In December 2006 a sit-in was undertaken in front of the Mexican consulate in Los Angeles and an APPOsada (from *posada*, a Christmas celebration in Mexico) at St. Cecilia Church in Santa Monica. The APPOsada included many popular culture activities and demonstrations protesting the deaths of some 26 individuals perpetrated or allowed to go unpunished by the state forces in Oaxaca.

In this case as in many others, the FIOB employed a strategy directed at both the mass media and the alternative media. It issued communiqués, held press conferences, monitored the information published on the events in Oaxaca by the media to compare it with what it heard directly, and kept the media informed. These strategies reinforced and complemented the general strategies of the organization such as mobilizations in support of civil, political, economic, and social human rights. In addition to the media campaigns, the FIOB held community assemblies at the local level parallel to the assemblies of the APPO movement (Stephen, 2009).

The binational mobilization around the 2006 conflict in Oaxaca City raises a number of critical questions: Where does Oaxaca begin and end for indigenous Oaxacan migrants? Is the border geographical or is it existential? Is it on the streets of Los Angeles, where the annual performance of the Guelagueta in 2012 drew almost 5,000 people, or in the fields of the San Joaquin Valley, where more than 90,000 Mixtecs now work and where they can cheer for their favorite team of pre-Hispanic handball players (*pelota mixteca*) every Sunday? Is it part of the everyday practice of indigenous Mexican migrants? The answer is that their community transcends the border between the United States and Mexico, just as Michael Kearney first theorized.

## CONCLUSIONS

Indigenous autonomy, understood as the exercise of authority by indigenous communities whatever their physical location, has been a fundamental response to Mixtec and Zapotec experiences of migration. In this context, indigenous communities have reconceptualized and expanded the political community to allow the incorporation of the immense indigenous population dispersed across many geographical borders.

The active participation of indigenous migrants in the affairs of their communities of origin has allowed them to construct, reinforce, and strengthen their ethnic identity, which has allowed them, at the same time, to build binational political organizations that further fortify close ties with communities in Oaxaca and enrich their lives in the United States. In this context, the transnational organizations of migrants perform two basic tasks: they institutionalize political practices that allow for collective action in the different places where migrants are located, and they institutionalize cultural exchange practices and the circulation of information that give meaning to a political community that transcends geographical borders at the community, state, and international levels.

The cultural base of Mixtec and Zapotec migrant organizations in Los Angeles is a new sense of panethnic identity—Mixtec and Zapotec ethnicity—that was

formerly nonexistent in Oaxaca (Zapotecs and Mixtecs were enemies in prehistoric and early historic times). There is a strong relationship between the emergent ethnicities and the formation of migrant political organizations among various indigenous migrant communities whose political participation and activism in California have been creating and reinforcing their ethnic identity, holding “the community” together as it becomes ever more extended throughout Mexico and the United States. Further, indigenous migrants have been and remain able to mobilize and transform cultural and social resources within their traditional society and culture to resist full incorporation into highly exploitive wage labor situations and acculturation. Thus, whereas most conventional migration theories predict that long-term extensive migration reduces ethnicity and promotes assimilation (Kearney, 1995a; Rivera-Salgado, 2000), my research and that of Michael Kearney point to just the opposite.

As Kearney and Nagengast (1989) observed, a key assumption of transnationalism is the notion that racial, ethnic, and national identities are constructed categories that migrants reconfigure and strategically deploy. Indigenous migrant organizations not only engage in nation building but also assist in the construction of transnational identities. Consequently, migrants fashion multiple identities within a complex geographical landscape that includes their communities of origin and multiple sites along their migratory network. As a result of migration, ethnic and regional identities are problematized, become particularly salient, and are reconfigured and deployed both to accommodate and to resist subordination within a transnational capitalist system.

The process in which migrants create their own public spaces and membership organizations is built on the establishment of transnational communities. The existence of transnational communities is a precondition for an emerging migrant civil society, which also must involve the construction of public spaces and representative social and civic organizations. I would suggest that Mixtecs and Zapotecs are constructing a binational civil society, one that will in time incorporate other indigenous groups. Michael Kearney would like that.

## NOTES

1. *Mestizo* is a broad cultural-based term that describes the majority of the Spanish-speaking Mexican population—of part indigenous, part Spanish descent. This term has multiple meanings depending on the classificatory regime and the political dynamics of the specific place and relative political position of the indigenous population. Bonfil Batalla (1987: 73) considers mestizos in Mexico “de-Indianized Indians,” and de la Cadena (2005: 259) argues that “mestizo . . . houses a conceptual hybridity—the mixture of two classificatory regimes—which reveals subordinate alternatives for mestizo subject positions, including forms of indigeneity.”

2. The 15 largest indigenous language groups in Mexico are Nahuatl (1,771,000), Maya (1,149,000), Zapoteco (546,000), Mixteco (534,000), Tzotzil (445,000), Otomí (427,000), Tzeltal (349,000), Totonaco (289,000), Mazahua (256,000), Mazateco (224,000), Huasteco (186,000), Chol (174,000), Chinanteco (157,000), P’urépecha (141,000), and Tlapaneco (98,000) (Serrano, Embriz, and Fernández, 2003: 73–74).

3. In Mexico City, Mixtecs and Zapotecs are in third and fourth place, with 14 percent and 13.5 percent, respectively, followed by Mazahuas with 4.2 percent (Comisión de Derechos Humanos del Distrito Federal, 2008).

4. In 1994, of the 803 municipalities considered by the Instituto Nacional Indigenista to be predominantly indigenous, 25 percent were said to “expel farmworkers.” By 1998–1999, 38 percent of indigenous municipalities fell into this category (cited in Barrón, 2003). Approximately 40 percent

of Mexico's farmworker population is indigenous, with Guerrero now ahead of Oaxaca as the leading source (Barrón, 2003: 49).

5. Hñahñu migrants from Hidalgo have now reached almost 15 percent of the population of Clearwater, Florida (Schmidt and Crummett, 2004).

6. On the interaction between national and international Mexican migration, see Lozano-Ascencio, Roberts, and Bean (1999).

7. Besserer (2003: 67–79) has documented that this municipality received remittances from 171 locations scattered across 7 states in Mexico and 15 states in the United States.

8. The CIW's struggle is notable for its success in convicting violent labor contractors of slavery. Founded in 1994, the CIW works to empower low-wage workers in southwestern Florida, and its members include Latinos, Haitians, and indigenous migrants from Mexico and Guatemala (see <http://www.ciw-online.org>).

9. The music festival known as the Guelaguetza has been celebrated in Los Angeles since 1982. This festival emulates the festival also known as Lunes del Cerro, which is celebrated in Oaxaca at the end of July. "Guelaguetza" means "exchange" or "mutual help" in the Zapotec language. On the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Guelaguetza in Los Angeles, see Quinones (2012).

10. The Banda Juvenil Solaga USA-Oaxaca visited its hometown of Solaga in Oaxaca in July 2004. See the text of their CD-insert at <http://www.myspace.com/bandajuvenilsolagaosaxaca>.

11. Ethnic slurs used against indigenous migrants from Guerrero include "nacos, güancos, huarachudos, montañeros, piojosos, indios pata rajada, calzonudos, comaleros, sombrero rudos, sin razón, paisanitos, indio bajado a tamborazos de la Montaña, Metlatontos (de Metlatónoc), Tlapanacos (Tlapanecos), son de Tlapa de me conformo (Tlapa de Comonfort), tu no savi, tu sí savi (tu no sabes, tu sí sabes), mixtequillo, indiorante (ignorante), paisa, mixterco (mixteco terco)" (quoted in García Leyva, 2003), <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2003/11/24/oja-caminos.html>.

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