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# REFRAMING MEXICAN MIGRATION AS A MULTI-ETHNIC PROCESS<sup>1</sup>

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1 A longer version of this paper was presented at the Latin American Studies Association in 2004. Some sections draw from Fox and Rivera-Salgado (2004).

## Abstract

*The Mexican migrant population in the US increasingly reflects the ethnic diversity of Mexican society. To recognize Mexican migration as a multi-ethnic process raises broader conceptual puzzles about race, ethnicity, and national identity. This essay draws from recent empirical research and participant-observation to explore implications of the indigenous Mexican migrant experience for understanding collective identity formation, including the social construction of community membership, regional and pan-ethnic identities, territory, and transnational communities.*

## Keywords

indigenous; migration; Mexico; collective identity

## Introduction

In the US, when the terms “multi-ethnic,” “multi-cultural,” and “multi-racial” are used to refer to Mexican migrants, they refer exclusively to relationships between Mexicans and *other* racial and national origin groups. Yet Mexican society is multi-ethnic and multi-racial. From an indigenous rights perspective, the Mexican nation includes many peoples. To take the least ambiguous indicator of ethnic difference, more than one in ten Mexicans come from a family in which an indigenous language is spoken (Serrano Carreto *et al.*, 2003). Many of the indigenous Mexican activists in the US on the cutting edge are *trilingual*, and for some, Spanish is neither their first nor their second language. Yet in the US, most scholars, labor



organizers, civil rights groups, cultural workers, and funding agencies treat Mexicans as ethnically homogeneous.

The Mexican migrant population in the US increasingly reflects the ethnic diversity of Mexican society, but our conceptual frameworks have yet to catch up. This essay explores a series of conceptual puzzles about collective identity formation that emerge once one recognizes ethnic difference among Mexican migrants. The first issue is that both Mexican migrant and Mexican indigenous collective identities complicate widely held ideas about race, ethnicity, and national identity. Though these three concepts are often used interchangeably when discussing Mexicans in the United States, race, ethnicity, and national identity are not synonyms. If these three concepts are analytically distinct, then where and when does one leave off and the other begin? Second, when migrant and indigenous identities *overlap*, as in the case of indigenous Mexican migrants, then the conceptual puzzles about the distinctions between racial, ethnic and national identity are sharpened. A comparative and binational approach suggests that it is useful to look at the specific experiences and identities of indigenous Mexican migrants in the US through lenses that draw *both* from frameworks that focus on processes of racialization *and* from those that emphasize the social construction of collective identities based on ethnicity, region or religion. In other words, this approach unfolds at the intersection of Ethnic and Area Studies frameworks.<sup>2</sup>

2 The essay addresses questions that emerged from the convergence between two long-term, parallel projects. The first is the UC Santa Cruz Hemispheric Dialogues faculty working group's process of "conceptual translation," an approach that tries to facilitate intellectual exchange by making conceptual assumptions explicit. For related ideas in the field of immigration studies, see Morawska (2003). The second project, which began in 1997, is the author's long-term participant-observation partnership with the FIOB (Frente Indígena de

### Background trends

Historically, most Mexican migrants did share many social origins, coming primarily from *mestizo* rural communities in the central-western part of the country. Over the last two decades, however, the Mexican migrant population has diversified dramatically – ethnically, socially and geographically (both in terms of where they come from and where they settle).<sup>3</sup> For example, Afro-Mexican migrants from Oaxaca and Guerrero began working in Winston-Salem, North Carolina in the early 1990s (Vaughn, 2005).

The history of specifically indigenous migration to the US dates at least to the Bracero program, though their ethnic identity was largely invisible to outsiders.<sup>4</sup> Until recently, however, most indigenous migrants worked in large cities or as farmworkers *within* Mexico. Their relative share of the overall cross-border migrant population began to grow in the early 1980s, as Oaxacans who had migrated to northwestern Mexico began crossing the US border to settle in the US, a path sometimes known as the *Ruta Mixteca*.<sup>5</sup> The indigenous proportion of the Mexican migrant population has since grown significantly, most notably in both urban and rural California and increasingly in Texas, New York, New Jersey, Florida, North Carolina, Oregon, and Washington. Migrants also now come from an increasingly diverse array of Mexico's indigenous ethnic groups,

now even including Mayans from the Yucatan and Chiapas (e.g., Burke, 2004; Fox and Rivera-Salgado, 2004; Schmidt and Crummett, 2004).<sup>6</sup>

The point of departure for analyzing collective identity formation here is that *both* in the US *and* in Mexico, indigenous migrants are subordinated *both* as migrants *and* as indigenous people – economically, socially, and politically. Economically, they work in the bottom rungs of ethnically segmented labor markets. In the social sphere, they also face entrenched racist attitudes and discrimination from other Mexicans in both countries, as well as from the dominant US society. Systematic language discrimination by public authorities aggravates human rights violations in both countries. Like other Mexican migrants, in the civic-political arena, most indigenous migrants are excluded from full citizenship rights in both countries. At the same time, also like other migrants, indigenous Mexicans bring with them a wide range of experiences with collective action for community development, social justice, and political democratization, and these repertoires influence their decisions about who to work with and how to build their own organizations in the US.

## Conceptual puzzles

### How does contemporary Mexican migration pose challenges to concepts of racial, ethnic, and national identities – in the US and in Mexico?

First, what do these three concepts have in common? They all refer to ways of understanding and expressing collective identity, and all refer in some way to shared ancestry, yet each one highlights a different dimension of the identity that is shared. For migrants to the US, Mexican-ness is simultaneously national, racial, and ethnic, but which is which, when and why? These concepts clearly overlap, but are also presumably somehow distinct – the challenge is to identify those distinctions with greater precision. Bringing together intellectual frameworks and lessons from practice from both the US and Latin America can help to address this conceptual challenge.

In the arena of Mexico's dominant national political culture, both indigenous peoples and cross-border migrants have long been seen as less than full citizens, especially by political elites. This powerful historical legacy only began to change substantially within Mexico in the mid-1990s. For migrants, Mexico's current president dramatically changed the official discourse, describing them as "heroes" rather than as traitors or *pochos*. He even claimed all US citizens of Mexican descent as members of the national diaspora, blurring long-standing distinctions between Mexicans and Mexican Americans (Durand, 2004).

In practice, full democratic political rights in Mexico are still widely denied both to migrants and to indigenous people. Changes in official political discourse notwithstanding, even a quick review of the dominant mass media

Organizaciones Binacionales, formerly known as the Frente Indígena Oaxaqueño Binacional). For overviews of the FIOB, see, among others, Rivera-Salgado (2002), Velasco (2002), Ramírez Romero (2003), Domínguez Santos (2004), and [www.fiob.org](http://www.fiob.org).

<sup>3</sup> For details on recent trends, see the "Special Issue on US-Mexico Migration," *Migration Information Source*, March, 2004, which includes useful maps of the county-by-county distribution of the Mexican-born population in the US. See [www.migrationinformation.org](http://www.migrationinformation.org). Zuñiga and Hernández –León document the process of Mexican settlement in new destinations, though most of the studies do not address ethnic difference among Mexicans (2005).

<sup>4</sup> García's history of Nahua experiences (2003) traces indigenous Mexican migration to the US back even further, noting that Manuel Gamio's study of migrants documented people of "Mesoamerican" origin, though without further ethnic specification.

5 The first wave of research on Oaxacan migration to California included Kearney (1988, 1995, 2000), Nagengast and Kearney (1990), Zabin (1992a, b, 1997), Zabin *et al.* (1993) and Escárcega and Varese (2004). This research helped to inform a pioneering partnership between indigenous migrant community leaders and California Rural Legal Assistance, leading to the first Mixteco-speaking farmworker support program more than a decade ago. As CRLA director José Padilla recalled recently, “they organized us” (interview, Washington, D.C., November 5, 2005). While the early research focused specifically on Mixtecos in rural California, Zapotecs migrated to urban areas. On Zapotec migration, see Hulshof (1991), Klaver (1997), Cohen (2004), López and Runsten (2004) and Stephen (2006).

6 At least since the Salinas presidency (1988–1994), the Mexican government’s rural development strategy has been based on the assumption that a large proportion of the rural poor would

shows that they also remain culturally excluded from the national imaginary. While indigenous Mexicans can access “full Mexican-ness” to the degree that they give up their languages and commitments to ethnic autonomy, migrants are still widely seen by many as watering down their *Mexicanidad* through exposure to US and to Mexican-American culture.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, politically, this is one reason why the long-promised right to vote abroad for migrants was stuck in political limbo until 2005 – Mexican citizens in the US are still seen by influential elite political actors as too vulnerable to manipulation by US interests to be trusted with the right to vote (Martínez Saldaña and Ross Pineda, 2002; Castañeda, 2003, 2004, 2006). For both migrants and indigenous peoples, less than full command of the Spanish language is another powerful mechanism for exclusion from equal membership in Mexico’s national polity and imaginary. Consider the common analogous phrases: those Mexicans who “don’t even speak Spanish” (in the US) and those Indians who “*ni siquiera hablan español*” (a Mexican phrase, in reference to “monolingual” indigenous people). In other words, both ethnic difference and cross-border mobility remain in tension with the dominant approach to Mexican national identity.

In the 1990s, for first-generation Mexican migrants, national origin persisted as a primary collective identity, more than US-based constructs of *Latinidad* or *Hispanidad*.<sup>8</sup> Especially in regions with a large critical mass of first-generation migrants, it is possible for Mexican migrants to reject, modify, or postpone acceptance of more nationally rooted US ethnic identities, such as Chicano or Mexican American. In spite of the pull of national identity, Mexicans migrants also find themselves inserted into a US racial hierarchy that assigns them to a racial category. In other words, migrants’ subjectively *national* Mexican-ness is widely treated as a *racial* identity in the US. The concept of racialization is increasingly being applied to understand Latino experiences in the US. A fuller understanding of the dynamics through which racialization processes affect Mexicans would require more systematic cross-regional comparison within the US.<sup>9</sup> A cross-border perspective would also deepen our understanding of the process, since for many indigenous migrants, racialization begins in Mexico and among other Mexicans in the US.<sup>10</sup>

In the case of Mexican migrants, the racialization process is closely linked to their locations in the labor market, which in turn are linked to labor process, language use and only loosely connected to phenotype. “Mexican work” has long been widely understood in US popular discourse as the kind that even low-income Americans will not do, at least for the wages offered.<sup>11</sup> For example, as a Mexican poultry processing worker put it, describing a white North American on the same production line:

‘He works like a Mexican.... Look, we’re all Mexicans here [in the plant]. Screwed-over Mexicans [Pointing to Li, an older woman on our line who is from Laos, he continues] Look, even she is Mexican. Pure.’... [As the analyst

noted, this is] ‘almost the same as saying ‘yes, we are all workers here.’ It is not exactly the same, of course. Mexican does not simply mean worker – any kind of worker – but one who is doing what is socially defined as the worst kind of work’ (Striffler, 2002, 312).

*Among* Mexican migrant workers, ethnic difference also interacts closely with the changing division of labor. Notably, indigenous Mexicans currently make up between 10 and 15% of California’s farm labor force, and their share is projected to reach 20% by 2010 (Kissam, 2003).<sup>12</sup>

Two recent public campaigns show different ways of reacting to the US racial formation process. In the first one, organized migrants came together to seek a more prominent place in the public sphere through the 2003 cross-country Immigrant Worker Freedom Rides. The second approach, built on popular religiosity, eludes US racialization by reproducing *Mexicanidad*.

The Freedom Ride initiative was led by the broadest multi-racial set of US civil society organizations – the trade union movement. This campaign was made possible by the growing voice and clout of Latino labor leaders.<sup>13</sup> Here, a multi-racial coalition of migrants of many nationalities explicitly reached out to diverse US constituencies by taking on the historical mantle of the “master frame” of the African-American civil rights movement. California’s Oaxacan migrant umbrella organization, the FOCOICA, was officially represented on the ride.<sup>14</sup>

In several areas of new Mexican settlement in the US, the Freedom Ride permitted migrant organizations to become public actors for the first time (Reyes, 2003a, b; Miller, 2004). Old habits die hard, however, and some Mexican migrant bus riders were frustrated with cross-cultural disconnects, erupting at one point into a brief, behind-the-scenes “rebellion” against the union coordinators of one of the buses.<sup>15</sup> This small but revealing incident is emblematic of how much more work is needed to build and sustain cross-cultural coalitions. Overall, the Freedom Ride appeared to make unprecedented inroads in terms of projecting humanizing images of migrants in the mainstream media.

In contrast, other migrant organizations deploy their Mexican identities as primary. Shortly after the Freedom Ride, the *Asociación Tepeyac* – a New York-based, Jesuit-led Mexican membership organization – led its own mass traveling collective action for immigrant rights.<sup>16</sup> Tepeyac’s second annual relay Torch Run traveled through several of Mexico’s “sending” regions and arrived in Saint Patrick’s Cathedral in New York City on December 12 (“*Antorcha Guadalupana Mex-NY*”). Along the way, the runners, called “*Mensajeros por la Dignidad de un Pueblo Dividido por la Frontera*” prayed to the Virgin for the right to permanent legal residency. Their repertoire clearly resonates among Mexicans.

leave their homes and move to the cities and to the US (Fox, 1994).

7 A recent national poll asked “*En su opinión, el hecho de que haya millones de mexicanos trabajando en los Estados Unidos, enriquece o perjudica: La cultura de México?*” Of the respondents, 50% said that migration undermines Mexican culture, 23% said that it enriches Mexican culture, and 27% said neither or no opinion (Consulta Mitovsky, 2004, 5).

8 Among foreign-born Latinos in the US, 68% identify primarily with their country of origin, rather than as Latinos or Hispanics (Pew Hispanic Center, 2002, 7).

9 See notable recent work on Mexicans in Chicago, including De Genova and Ramos-Zayas (2003), De Genova (2005) and Arredondo’s analysis of the relationship between national and racial identities among Mexicans in the 1930s (2006). On the historical processes of racialization of Mexicans in California, see Almaguer (1994), Menchaca (2001) and Pitti (2003), among others. On the

distinctive contemporary dynamics of racialization of Mexican migrants in New York City, see R. Smith (2005). See also Glenn's cross-regional comparative approach (2002).

10 On contemporary racism in Mexico, see, among others, Castellanos Guerrero (2003).

11 For example, this stereotype was a strong point of agreement among both white and black panelists on the HBO late-night talk show "Tough Crowd" (February 16, 2004). The term "Mexican work" goes back at least to the 1920s (Arredondo, 2006).

12 On ethnic segmentation *within* the Mexican migrant labor force in the US, see Nagengast and Kearney (1990), Nagengast *et al.* (1992), Zabin (1992a, b), Zabin *et al.* (1993), Krissman (1996, 2002) and López and Runsten (2004).

13 For an overview of Mexican worker organizing trends in the US, see Milkman (2005).

14 The two returning Oaxacan migrant federation representatives on the ride were honored with a photo on the front

Tepeyac's main strategy for forging collective identity is based around the combined ethno-national and spiritual symbolism of the *Virgen de Guadalupe*, together with an explicit effort to build a collective identity as undocumented workers (Solís, 2001, 2002; Gálvez, 2004). Their use of this symbolism clearly has class and racial solidarity implications, and the torch run draws on a pre-Hispanic legacy, but at the same time Tepeyac does not appear to pursue a strategy of reaching out in culturally specific ways to today's indigenous Mexican migrants. Indigenous Mexican migrants do participate, but apparently as Guadalupanos rather than as Mixtecos or as Nahuas.<sup>17</sup> Rather than follow the hometown-based approach to migrant organizing, Tepeyac organizes its social base in neighborhood *Comités Guadalupanos*. In contrast to the Immigrant Worker Freedom Riders' union-led, multi-national approach, Tepeyac's founding US partner was the New York Diocese of the Catholic Church (Rivera Sánchez, 2004).

Both the Freedom Ride and Tepeyac's Torch Run brought organized migrants into the public sphere, both crossed vast territories in the process, both were organized from below but counted on institutional allies in the US. Yet they followed different strategies to broaden their bases – one ventured from west to east, while the other traveled from south to north. The Freedom Ride framed migrants as the most recent wave in the long history of struggle against social exclusion in the US, building a multi-racial class identity as immigrant *workers*, while Tepeyac looked across the border to build a shared identity as Mexicans fighting for dignity and recognition as *Mexicans*.

More generally, when one looks at the interaction between race, ethnicity, and national identity among those Mexican migrants who engage in sustained collective action as Mexicans, it turns out that most emphasize their primary identification with *other* collective identities. In the case of Tepeyac, this identity is strongly faith-based. Most often, however, these additional identities are *territorial* and *subnational*, based on their communities, regions or states of origin in Mexico, as can be seen in widely observed growth of migrant hometown associations and their federations.<sup>18</sup> In other words, migrants' shared Mexican-ness, whether understood primarily in national, ethnic, or racial terms, is necessary but not sufficient to explain how and why they turn collective identities into collective action. The shared identities that inspire collective action show that they pursue a wide range of ways of *being* Mexican (just like Mexicans in Mexico). One could go further and argue that these widespread patterns of Mexican migrant collective identity formation and collective action, based on cross-border, translocal, regional, and ethnic identities constitute a form of *resistance* to racialization, reminiscent of the *mutualistas* in the early 20th century.

Nation-states are also key players in migrants' collective identity formation process. Systems of coercion and institutionalized assimilation would be their

most obvious instruments. At the same time, past struggles for racial justice have embedded institutional changes that also influence the terrain on which migrant campaigns for rights unfold. One example involves long-standing debates over the US census, whose influence resonates throughout the rest of the state apparatus. For Latinos in general and indigenous migrants in particular, it is very relevant that the census explicitly defines Latinos/Hispanics as an ethnic group and not as a race – leading to the classic official caveat “Hispanics can be of any race” (Oboler, 1995; Rodríguez, 2000; Yanow, 2003). The questions of self-identification are asked separately, and it turns out that the order of the questions influences the responses. Given the US census choices for racial self-identification, which do not include *mestizo*, it turns out that in 2000, as many as half of Latinos answered the race question with “other”, thereby creating their own *de facto racial* category (Crece and Ramirez, 2003; Navarro, 2003; Tafoya, 2003).

For the specific purpose of trying to find self-identified indigenous Latin American migrants in the census, it turns out that they do have a choice when responding to the US census: they can identify both *ethnically* as Latinos and *racially* as American Indians. In the 2000 census, many did just that. If one looks at the overlap between these two categories, the census data for California show that native peoples from Latin America, primarily Mexico and Guatemala, now constitute the majority of Native Americans in the state, counting over 150,000 people – in spite of the well-known and persistent problem of undercounting migrants. Note that this combined ethnic-racial category is limited to those who indicated Native American as their *one* race. Based on this approach, the total reported population of Latin American indigenous migrants in the US numbers more than 400,000 (Huizar and Cerda, 2004).<sup>19</sup> Informal population estimates by community media, such as the Los Angeles-based binational newspaper *El Oaxaqueño*, run much higher.

The Mexican state’s strategies also directly influence collective identity formation among migrants in the US (Goldring, 2002; Smith, 2003a). Home-state governments have been at least as active as the federal government in their efforts to reach out and create institutional channels for dialog with their respective diasporas. The political sociology concept of “political opportunity structures” is helpful for understanding both how migrants choose to organize and who they ally within the US. For more than 15 years, Mexican state and federal governments have encouraged (trans)local hometown clubs to form home-state associations. In some cases these home-state migrant federations become consolidated civil society counterparts to Mexican state governments (as in Zacatecas), in others they remain subordinate to state governments (as in Guanajuato and Jalisco), in some cases one sees both scenarios unfold (Oaxaca), while others remain open-ended (Michoacán).<sup>20</sup>

page of the Los Angeles-based *El Oaxaqueño* newspaper, October, 18, 2003, 4(116).

15 According to one participant, they were reportedly turned off by some union staffers’ styles, their lack of Spanish, and their efforts to prohibit Mexican flags while encouraging the display of US flags (interview, Los Angeles, January, 2005). See Ehrenreich (2003) and Jamison (2005) for detailed accounts of the Ride.

16 See [www.tepeyac.org](http://www.tepeyac.org).

17 See Rivera Sánchez (2004). Indeed, one analytical puzzle is why Mixteco migrants from *Oaxaca* publicly identify ethnically in California, while Mixtecos from *Puebla* in New York apparently do not. Note also that the word “Mixteca” refers to a region that reaches parts of the states of Oaxaca, Puebla and Guerrero, while the term Mixteco refers to the main indigenous ethno-linguistic group in that region (also know as *ñu savi*, “the people of the rain”). For example, the name of one Brooklyn-based Latino immigrant rights group is Mixteca Organization, a term



that draws on their Puebla regional identity without reference to indigenous identity (www.mixteca.org).

On Nahua migrants to New York state from Veracruz, see Zepeda and Appendini (2005).

18 The literature on Mexican migrant transnational communities, hometown associations, and their federations is large and growing. See, among others, Smith (1995, 2003a, b), Goldring (1998, 2002), Leiken (2000), Fitzgerald (2000, 2004), Bada (2003, 2004), Besserer (2003), de la Garza and Hazan (2003), Fletcher and Margold (2003), Moctezuma (2003), Smith (2003), Lanly and Valenzuela (2004), Orozco with LaPointe (2004), and Rivera-Salgado and Escala Rabadán (2004).

19 For an analysis of current issues of census undercount that specifically affect indigenous migrants in California, see Kissam and Jacobs (2004).

20 Further cross-state comparative analysis is needed to draw more solid conclusions (cross-state refers here to different states in both countries).

### How do the concepts of race, ethnicity, community, and nationality relate to the social construction of indigenous Mexican migrant identity?

Indigenous peoples are usually conceptualized in the US as constituting a race, while in Latin America they tend to be seen as ethnic groups.<sup>21</sup> This poses a puzzle, raising questions about how the concepts of race and ethnicity are defined and applied. Where does ethnicity leave off and race begin? Given that they often overlap, both conceptually and in practice, can they be disentangled? Are indigenous peoples distinct from other Mexicans racially, ethnically, or both? To ask the question a different way – is Mexican society multi-racial, multi-ethnic, or both? The answer to both is – both.

Indigenous ethnic identity has long been seen in Latin America as socially and culturally contingent – in sharp contrast to the “blood quantum” approach in the US. For decades, indigenous people who move to the cities and appear to leave behind collective cultural practices, language use, and community membership have long been seen as having changed their ethnic identity. While no longer ethnically defined by others as indigenous, they are often still openly racialized by dominant systems of oppression, though the processes and mechanisms vary greatly from country to country. These processes are perhaps most clear-cut in the case of *cholos* in Andean countries, but they affect urban Indians in Mexico City as well.<sup>22</sup>

At the same time, many urban Indians in Mexico – like indigenous migrants in the US – continue to maintain ties with their communities of origin. This raises the question of whether and how indigenous Mexican migration to the US is qualitatively distinct from their long-standing patterns of migration to Mexico’s cities. For example, migrants in the US often make more money than migrants who work elsewhere in Mexico, and are therefore able to contribute more to community development investments back home – yet visiting home personally is often more difficult. For some nationalist approaches, migrating to the US continues to represent a fundamental break – as in the case of a recent Zapatista commander’s declaration: “Don’t let yourself be deceived, stay here and fight for your country, for the motherland that gave birth to you ... you don’t have to leave” (AP, 2003). Yet in 2003, for the first time, accounts from Zapatista communities reported that some Mayan youth were beginning to leave for the US.

Until relatively recently, the primary basis of indigenous collective identity in Mexico was highly localized. Most Mexican indigenous people identified primarily with their home community, to varying degrees with their home region, and only rarely with their broader ethno-linguistic group. Membership has long been internally regulated by each community’s traditional norms, and the rights of membership are usually contingent on compliance with high levels of mandatory service and material contributions. Some communities are making

membership requirements more flexible, in response to migration, while many others hold firm and literally expel those who do not comply through a process that some call “civic death” (Mutersbaugh, 2002; Robles, 2004). The long-standing central role of community in defining ethnicity is summed up in the ambiguity inherent in the dual meaning of the term “*pueblo*,” which in Mexico is used to refer *both* to community (as in village) and to (a) people. This dual meaning of “*pueblo*” was crucial to allowing both the government and indigenous movement negotiators to agree on the text of the 1996 San Andrés Accords on Indigenous Rights and Culture, which remains a key reference point for the ongoing political struggle for full recognition of Mexico’s indigenous peoples.<sup>23</sup>

The process of the social construction of broader ethnic and pan-ethnic Mexican indigenous identities is where the racialization approach, emphasizing shared experiences of racially based oppression, is most clearly relevant.<sup>24</sup> Carole Nagengast and Michael Kearney pioneered the analysis of how the shared Oaxacan migrant experience of ethno-racial discrimination in north-western Mexico and in California drove the process of “scaling up” previously localized to broader Mixtec, Zapotec, and pan-ethnic Oaxacan indigenous identities (1990).<sup>25</sup> These migrants’ collective identities are powerfully influenced by their shared class locations. Many, though not all, work in ethnically segmented seasonal agricultural wage labor, both in Mexico and the US – bringing class and culturally based oppression together in forms that some would consider classically subaltern. This shared experience helped to overcome perceived conflicts of interest inherited from long-standing inter-village rivalries back home (these widespread conflicts were and are very convenient for regional and state elites). For indigenous farmworkers, language and cultural differences with their bosses are key bases of ethnic discrimination, but they are also oppressed based on physical characteristics associated with specifically racial differences. For example, height became a widespread basis for contemptuous treatment, as summed up in the widespread derogatory diminutive “*oaxaquito*.”<sup>26</sup> This specific term, by homogenizing Oaxaca’s ethnic differences, also racializes.

The relevance of this approach to identity formation, which associates the transition from localized to broader indigenous identities with migration, racial oppression, and resistance, is confirmed by the actual trajectory of the Oaxacan Indigenous Binational Front. The organization was first called the “Mixteco-Zapoteco Binational Front” and then changed its name to “Oaxacan” to reflect the inclusion of other Oaxacan ethnic groups. Recently, this inclusionary approach has attracted non-Oaxacan indigenous migrants to the organization, especially in Baja California, provoking an internal debate over whether to drop the regional term “Oaxacan” from its name. The FIOB’s Baja members are migrants as well, though they settled in Mexico. In March, 2005, delegates representing several thousand FIOB members in Oaxaca, California, and Baja

Addressing change over time is also needed. For example, the California-based Zacatecas organizations started out under strong official influence and gained autonomy over time. In contrast, the California-based Oaxacan organizations began divided over how to relate to the state government, eventually came together under the umbrella of a pluralistic, civic federation (FOCOICA), which later lost key member groups because of its president’s tilt towards the PRI’s 2004 gubernatorial candidate in Oaxaca.

21 For example, the Mexican census does not collect data on race, and defines indigenes in terms of language use. See Serrano Carreto *et al.* (2003).

22 For original new research on urban Indians in Mexico, see Yanes *et al.* (2004). On urban indigenous migrants in Latin America more generally, see Altamirano and Hirabayashi (1997).

23 For an English translation of this document, as well as Mexican perspectives on indigenous autonomy, see *Cultural Survival*, Spring, 1999.

24 The Ecuadorian indigenous movement experience also holds important lessons for understanding the process of “scaling up” from localized to broader pan-ethnic and racial identities. Pallares unpacks subtle interactions between racial, ethnic, and class-based identities, explaining change over time through factors both internal and external to local/regional movements that choose to come together nationally while retaining their autonomy (2002). Her extensive documentation of the struggle for “respect” at both the micro and macro-political levels, shows the degree to which Ecuador’s indigenous movement has been an anti-racist *civil rights* movement – rather than, for example, an ethnically separatist force. This experience is a powerful example of how the concept of racialization can resonate across a wide range of social contexts, taking agency into account through a focus on the interaction between practices of oppression and resistance. On ethnicity and collective identity among Ecuadorian transnational migrants, see Kyle (2000).

California agreed to change the name while keeping the acronym, to the “Indigenous Front of Binational Organizations.” Their newly elected Binational Commission included members of four distinct Mexican indigenous groups, including a Purépecha transportation engineer from the Baja-based contingent (Cano, 2005). To rephrase this in the spirit of this essay’s effort to reframe Mexican migration as a multi-ethnic process, these representatives include speakers of *five different Mexican languages*.

It is not only national rural-to-urban and trans-border migrations that have raised questions about the degree to which indigenous-ness depends on once-rigid notions of localized community membership, shared language and ancestral territory. The most well-known case of indigenous mobilization in Mexico emerged from a process of *rural-to-rural* migration. The original core region of the Zapatista rebellion – the *Cañadas* – is inhabited primarily by migrants from other Chiapas regions and their families, going back at most two generations (Leyva Solano and Ascencio Franco, 1996). Liberation theology ideas that drew heavily on the Exodus are central to their cultural and political history. Before leaving the highlands to settle in the *Cañadas* and the lowland forest, these communities also had extensive prior experience with seasonal migration for wage labor, where they joined an ethnic mix as plantation farmworkers. It is not a coincidence that their sense of indigenous identity is profoundly multi-ethnic, with ethnically distinct base organizations united under a multi-ethnic indigenous political leadership (primarily Tzetzal, Tzotzil, Chol, and Tojolobal). More recently, they adopted an explicit racial solidarity discourse, in which leaders speak of the shared interests, in spite of differing ideologies, of people who are the “*color de la tierra*” (EZLN, 2001). This definition of shared interests is made more complex by their other shared identities – as when Zapatista Comandante Felipe also appealed to Mexican factory workers as “*hermanos de nosotros*” (*La Jornada*, 30 November, 2003, 15).

In this sense the EZLN and FIOB can both be seen as multi-ethnic organizations that first emerged in communities of settled migrants. In the first case the migration went south, in the second case the migration went north, but in both cases their experiences and understandings of indigenous-ness can only be explained with reference to their (albeit very different) migration processes. In addition to both emerging from migrant communities, in both cases, early on, a small number of leftist activists also played key roles by encouraging the scaling up of previously localized collective identities.

The political trajectories of the two organizations came together briefly in the late 1990s, most notably when the FIOB organized polling stations in the US as part of the Mexican national civic referendum that called both for recognition of indigenous rights in Mexico and for the right for migrants to vote in Mexican elections (Rivera-Salgado, 2002; Martínez Saldaña, 2004). While they share the goal of self-determination and autonomy, their strategies differ dramatically.

While the EZLN does not participate in elections, the FIOB actively participates in local and state-level electoral politics, in coalition with the PRD. While the EZLN has created its own dual power municipal governance structure, the FIOB works within Oaxaca's unusual system of customary law to encourage broader participation and accountability within existing municipalities. In summary, the FIOB works to create autonomous spaces and representation "within the system," both in the US and in Mexico, while the EZLN remains firmly planted outside the system, conditioning their incorporation on more radical institutional change.

### **How does the social construction of migrant civil society lead us to rethink the concepts of territory and transnational communities?**

In Latin America, as in other regions of the world, classic definitions of indigenous rights, especially those involving demands for autonomy and self-determination, are closely linked to the concept of *territory*, which includes but is broader than (agrarian) land rights. Land rights are limited to individuals, families, groups, or communities, whereas *territories* are associated with the broader concept of peoplehood – and therefore are a foundation of ethnic identity.<sup>27</sup> The ethno-historical basis for claims to both land and territory is clearly distinct from demands for rights that are based on, for example, redressing *racial* injustice. Claims based on the need to challenge racial inequality are not as dependent on proving that specific territories are ancestral homelands. In most of Latin America, ethno-historically-based land claims have proven more "winnable," perhaps because of their more limited spillover effects.<sup>28</sup>

In this context, the radical spread of longer-term, longer-distance out-migration throughout Mexico's indigenous regions raises serious questions about the nature of the link between ethnic identity and the territorial basis of peoplehood, since many of the *pueblo* in question no longer live in their homeland, sometimes for generations. Indeed, neither the FIOB nor much of the EZLN base their claims to rights on territorially-based ancestral domain. Instead, both use broader multi- and pan-ethnic discourses to make claims based on racial discrimination, class oppression, and human rights.

In their redefinition of the relationship between peoplehood and territory, Oaxacan indigenous migrants have gone further and have socially constructed the cross-border public space known as "Oaxacalifornia." This transnationalized sphere emerged from the Mixtec and Zapotec migration processes of the 1980s, from Oaxaca to Baja California, to southern California and the Central Valley (reaching Oregon and Washington as well – see Stephen, 2004). In Oaxacalifornia, migrants bring together their lives in the US with their communities of origin, sustaining a deterritorialized community from which new forms of social, civic and cultural engagement emerged.<sup>29</sup>

25 Migration is not the only pathway for "scaling up" previously localized indigenous collective identities in Mexico. Over the past two decades, cycles of collective action and conflict, combined with coalitions with other social actors, have encouraged the consolidation of a wide range of "scaled-up" regional, civic-political, ethnic, and pan-ethnic indigenous identities (Fox, 1996). Indeed, the principal form of organized indigenous self-representation in Mexico is through *regional* social, civic, and economic mass membership organizations.

26 Mexican ethnic slurs used against indigenous migrants from Guerrero include "*nacos, güanacos, huarachudos, montañeros, piojosos, indios pata rajada, calzonudos, comaleros, sombrenudos, 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 si sabes), mixtequillo, indiorante (ignorante), paisa, mixterco (mixteco)*"

*terco*)”(cited in García Leyva, 2003).

27 For a theoretical discussion of “peoplehood,” see Smith (2003a, b).

28 For comparative discussion of race and ethnicity in Latin America, see Wade (1997). On “multi-cultural citizenship reforms” in the region, which differentially affect peoples of African and indigenous descent, see Hooker (2005).

29 “Oaxacalifornia” itself is an unusual example of a term coined by a scholar – Michael Kearney – and widely appropriated by the communities themselves – as indicated by even a casual review of the pages of the binational *El Oaxaqueño* newspaper. See [www.oaxacalifornia.com](http://www.oaxacalifornia.com).

30 Interview, Romualdo Juan Gutiérrez Cortés, Huajapan de León, Oaxaca, May, 2000, author’s translation.

In this context, Oaxacan migrants deploy the term *paisano* in what could be called a kind of “situational territorial identity” with a distinctively indigenous character. As the FIOB’s Oaxaca coordinator put it:

The word *paisano* can be interpreted on different levels... it depends on the context in which it is used. If we are in a specific community, you say *paisano* to mean being part of that community... it’s a mark of distinction for the person, showing their honorability... This term has been part of the peoples’ culture... With the need to migrate to other places, we find ourselves meeting people who, after talking a bit, we find out are from the some region, in a place filled with people from other states. There the concept is used to distinguish ourselves, and to bring us together more. Then the word reflects our identity as brothers.<sup>30</sup>

Here we see how collective identity “scales up” from home community to shared region of origin in the course of the migration process. At the same time, its territorial meaning turns out to be inseparable from its ethnic character, serving both to bring indigenous Oaxacans together and to distinguish them from Mexicans from other states. Regional identity melds with ethnic identity.

In this context, one analytical puzzle that emerges is why, in spite of the challenges posed by migration, some communities, within some ethnic groups create their own membership organizations and public spaces more than others. Consider the Nahua migrant experience. Though they represent the largest indigenous group in Mexico, and some have been migrating for perhaps a century, Nahua migrants have not sustained visible membership organizations in the US. Yet this does not mean that they are not organized or capable of cross-border collective action. On the contrary, it turns out that Nahua transnational communities from the state of Guerrero supported a pioneering and successful 1991 campaign in defense of their villages against a planned hydroelectric dam (Good, 1992; García Ortega, 2002). Coinciding with the Quincentenary, their sense of peoplehood as Nahuas was defined by this sense of shared Alto Balsas *regional* identity. Here territory and ancestral domain were clearly central, yet the migrant contributions to the campaign also demonstrated their full sense of shared membership in a Nahua identity and region that both were socially constructed largely in response to this dramatic external threat. This experience shares with the Chiapas rebellion and the creation of Oaxacalifornia the close link between collective (pan) ethnic identity and socially constructed regional identities.

### **How do the concepts of transnational communities, cultural citizenship, and translocal citizenship relate to ethnic difference among Mexicans?**

To frame this process of redefining the territorial basis of identity and membership, it is worth exploring the range and limits of several concepts that

anthropologists and sociologists have used to describe cross-border migrant identities that become the basis for collective action. The nascent process through which migrants are creating their own public spaces and cross-border membership organizations is built on the foundation of what are increasingly referred to as “transnational communities,” a concept that refers to groups of migrants whose daily lives, work and social relationships extend across national borders. Transnational communities are grounded by the combination of their sustained cross-border relationships with the sustained reproduction of their cultural legacy in the US. Some generate their own public spheres, as in the notable example of California’s five different annual Oaxacan Guelaguetza dance and music festivals – each one organized by a different set of membership organizations. The term Guelaguetza comes from the Zapotec, referring to the courtesy of mutual exchange. The festival honors the corn god, was partly appropriated by the church, then by the state, and in the process became a pan-ethnic celebration.<sup>31</sup>

These California festivals are the embodiment of “*Oaxacalifornia*” as an autonomous, pan-ethnic public sphere that is both uniquely Mexican and differently Mexican. They are held in parks, high school auditoriums, college campuses, and the largest is held in the LA Sports Arena – the former home of the Los Angeles Lakers basketball team. In each one, hundreds volunteer their time so that thousands can come together, so that parents can share their culture with their children. Indeed, few migrants had had the opportunity to see such a festival when they were living in Oaxaca. With so much activity, California’s multi-generational Oaxacan migrant dance groups are in high demand, and they represent yet another network of membership organizations (Cruz Manjarrez and Adriana, 2001). Each of the five annual festivals reveals an X-ray of the social networks and organizational styles of different strands of the web of Oaxacan civil society in California. For example, some are strictly cultural, others work with local Latino politicians and organizations, some collaborate with the PRI-controlled Oaxacan state government, while others keep their distance.

To describe cases where migrant collective action has transformed the public sphere in the US, some analysts use the concept of “cultural citizenship.” This term “names a range of social practices which, taken together, claim and establish a distinct social space for Latinos in this country” [the US] and serves as “a vehicle to better understand community formation... It involves the right to retain difference, while also attaining membership in society.”<sup>32</sup> This process may or may not be linked to membership in a territorially-based community, either in the home country or the US. Instead it may be driven by other kinds of shared collective identities, such as racialized and gendered class identities as Latina or Latino workers. The idea of cultural citizenship is complementary to but quite distinct from the notion of transnational community, which both focuses on a specific kind of collective identity and emphasizes sustained cross-border community membership.

31 Two are held in Los Angeles, including the longest-running California Guelaguetza, led by the Oaxacan Regional Organization, as well as the largest one, organized by the Oaxacan Federation (FOCOICA). The Coalition of Oaxacan and Indigenous Communities in northern San Diego County holds theirs at California State University, San Marcos, together with ME-ChA. Two different branches of the Indigenous Front of Binational Organizations hold Guelaguetza festivals as well, one in the central valley in Fresno, the other on the Ventura County coast in Santa Maria. In Oaxaca, the state government has organized the main annual celebration each year

since the early 1930s (Poole, 2002).

32 See Flores and Benmayor (1997, 1). See also Rocco (2004).

33 In some cases this process could be called “dual community citizenship,” but since many migrant communities are “multi-local,” or “multi-sited,” it is more inclusive to use a more open-ended term. See Besserer (2003).

34 On gender and Oaxaca indigenous community membership, both in migration and communities of origin, see Velasco (2002, 2004), Velásquez (2004), Maldonado and Artia (2004), and Stephen (2006).

35 For discussion of the strengths and limitations of the re-

A third way of conceptualizing migrants as social actors sees them as constructing a *de facto* form of what one could call “*translocal community citizenship*.” This term refers to the process through which indigenous migrants are becoming active members both of their communities of settlement and their communities of origin.<sup>33</sup> Like the idea of transnational community, translocal community citizenship refers to the cross-border extension of the boundaries of an existing social sphere, but the term “citizenship” differs from “community” in at least two ways. First, it involves much more precise criteria for determining membership rights and obligations. Second, it refers explicitly to membership in a public sphere. The idea of “translocal community citizenship” therefore involves much more explicit boundaries of membership in the public affairs of a community that is geographically dispersed, or “deterritorialized.”

Like cultural citizenship, the term “community citizenship” refers to a socially constructed sense of membership, often built through collective action, but it differs in at least three ways. First, community “citizenship” incorporates the term *that is actually used by the social actors themselves* to name their own experience of membership. In indigenous communities throughout rural Mexico, a member in good standing – one who fulfills specific obligations and therefore can exercise specific rights – is called a “citizen” of that community (often but not always male).<sup>34</sup> Note that this use of the term “citizen” for full membership in local indigenous communities appears to *predate* the widespread usage of the term by national and international civil society organizations.

In contrast, it is not clear whether the idea of cultural citizenship has been appropriated by those it refers to. Second, the idea of translocal community specifies the public space within which membership is exercised, whereas “cultural citizenship” is deliberately open-ended as to the *arena* of inclusion (local, regional or national? Territorial or sectoral?). Third, the concept of cultural citizenship focuses, quite appropriately given its goals, on the contested process of negotiating new terms of incorporation *into US society*, in contrast to the emphasis embedded in the idea of translocal community citizenship on the challenge of sustaining binational membership in a cross-border community.

The concept of translocal community citizenship has its own limits as well. It does not capture the broader, rights-based perspective that transcends membership in specific territorially-based (or “deterritorialized”) communities, such as the broad-based migrant movement for Mexican voting rights abroad, or the FIOB’s emphasis on pan-ethnic collective identities and indigenous and human rights. These collective identities are shared beyond specific communities. The idea of translocal is also limited insofar as it does not capture the frequently *multi-level* process of engagement between migrant membership organizations and the Mexican state at national and state as well as local levels.<sup>35</sup>

These different concepts for describing migrants as social actors are all complementary and reflect important dimensions of that process, each one

refers to social processes of migrant identity and organization that may overlap but are distinct, both in theory and in practice. At the same time, they do not capture the full range of migrant collective identities. The broader idea of “*migrant civil society*” provides an umbrella concept for describing diverse patterns of collective action. Migrant civil society refers to *migrant-led membership organizations and public institutions*, which includes four very tangible arenas of collective action – membership organizations, NGOs, communications media, and autonomous public spaces. Some elements of migrant civil society could be seen as representing a US “branch” of Mexican civil society, others reflect the Mexican branch of US civil society, while others embody arenas of overlap between the two – as in the case of the FIOB itself. While Mexican migrant organizations are increasingly engaged *both* with US civic and political life, *and* with Mexico, the FIOB is still one of the very few mass organizations that represent members *both* in the US and in Mexico.<sup>36</sup>

## Conclusions

The collective practices that are beginning to constitute a specifically indigenous Mexican migrant civil society show us a new side of what otherwise is an unrelentingly devastating process for Mexico’s indigenous communities – their abrupt insertion into globalized capitalism through international migration in search of wage labor. Their migratory experience has both broadened and transformed previously localized identities into ethnic, pan-ethnic, and racial identities, while also questioning widely held homogenous understandings of Mexican national identity. At the same time, “long-distance membership” in home communities, as well as the construction of new kinds of organizations not based on ties to the land raise unanswered questions about the classic close association between land, territory, and indigenous identity. The Mexican indigenous migrant experience also raises questions about how to think about the racialization process, which has been largely seen through US lenses. The now substantial literature on Oaxacan migrants shows that, for indigenous Mexicans, “racialization begins at home” – that is, in Mexico and among other Mexicans in the US.

Mexican migrants and indigenous peoples both pursue self-representation through multiple strategies, coalitions and repertoires. They also share the experience of having long been widely perceived by others as faceless masses – both in Mexico and in the US. Until recently, they have been recognized as victims or as threats, but not as collective actors. Both migrants and indigenous Mexicans are now in the midst of a long-term process of building their capacities for self-representation in their respective domains. Indigenous Mexican migrants are no exception. Do their organizations represent the indigenous wing of a broader cross-border migrant movement that would otherwise leave them out? Do they represent the migrant wing of the broader

lated concept of “transnational citizenship,” see Fox (2005a).

<sup>36</sup> For a detailed conceptual and empirical review of the landscape of Mexican migrant civil society, see Fox (2005b). On the trend towards US engagement among Mexican hometown associations and federations, see Zabin and Escala Rabadán (1998), Rivera-Salgado *et al.* (2005) and Hecht (2005).





national indigenous movement that would otherwise leave them out? Yes, and yes, but most of all they represent themselves, both indigenous and migrants.

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