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*Reclamando lo que es nuestro: Identity Formation among Zapoteco Youth in Oaxaca and
Los Angeles*

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Master of
Arts

in

Latin American Studies (Sociology)

by

Brenda Nicolás

Committee in charge:

Professor David S. FitzGerald, Chair
Professor April Linton
Professor Kirstie Dorr

2012

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The Thesis of Brenda Nicolás is approved and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication in microfilm and electronically:

Chair

University of California, San Diego

2012

DEDICATION

To Francisca Hernández Nicolás, my mother, friend and forever my aspiration. I cannot thank you enough. And to my nieces and nephews who I love as my own kids, Beatriz Martínez, Gabriela Martínez, Vanessa R. Ruiz, Jerónimo Martínez, and Anthony Ruiz—you mean the world to me, this is for you all.

EPIGRAPH

No pretendimos nunca ser un grupo para élites, pero tampoco queremos que haya alguien que reclame algo de lo nuestro.

-Indigenous Mexican

No soy indígena o quien sabe, a la mejor si— la mera verdad estoy confundida sobre mi identidad.

-Fanny, Oaxaca

La identidad es como una flor que cuando le pone agua, vuelve a renazer.

-Josefina, L.A.

The experience of racism enforces a search for cultural identity to resist [and] creates the possibility of new forms of organization and action.

-Gaspar Rivera-Salgado,
Mixtec Sociologist, L.A.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Reclamando lo que es nuestro: Identity Formation among Zapoteco Youth in Oaxaca and Los Angeles

by

Brenda Nicolás

Master of Arts in Latin American Studies (Sociology)

University of California, San Diego, 2012

Professor David S. FitzGerald, Chair

Almost no recent study has looked at the identity formation among indigenous college students in a transnational perspective. This present study looks at how Zapoteco college youth in Oaxaca, Mexico and Los Angeles, California reclaim and re-create their indigenous identity against stereotypical notions of what it means to be indigenous. As children these discriminatory remarks used by their peers in school have made them feel

ashamed of being indigenous. Much of the stereotypical and discriminatory notions of indigenous people come from preconceived notions of state creation of racial hierarchies, such as been the case of the Mexican nation state. This study seeks to explain that the youths' early civic and/or cultural participation in their pueblo influences them in college to identify as Zapotecos/as.

I attempt to describe that Zapoteco youth transform their identity through their political participation as college students. Since most of my interviewees study liberal arts courses in history, politics and other contemporary indigenous issues of Mexico and Latin America their indigeneity has been further reinforced with the knowledge they gain in the classroom. As the first in their family or pueblo to go to college these students feel proud of being Zapoteca/o from their pueblos in Oaxaca. Nevertheless, the states where both Zapotecos live change some of their perceptions of how they describe their indigeneity.

Based on qualitative and participant observation field work in Oaxaca City and Los Angeles metropolitan area youth's educational experiences, political and civic participation, are considered as reasons for their indigeneity in the 21st century.

Key Words: ethnic identity, transnational identity, Zapotecos-Oaxaca, youth, college-education, and discrimination.

Introduction

The abundant literature on indigenous identity in Mexico and the United States has not necessarily exhausted all the areas of inquiry. Almost no studies have analyzed transnational ethnic identity formation among politically active and college-educated indigenous youth. Zapotecos, as the largest indigenous group in Oaxaca (more than 371,740), and the largest indigenous Oaxaqueño immigrant group (more than 50,000) in metropolitan Los Angeles are playing a crucial role in re-creating their indigeneity in the 21st century.¹ This present study looks at how Zapoteco college youth in Oaxaca, Mexico and Los Angeles, California reclaim and re-create their indigenous identity against stereotypical notions of what it means to be indigenous.² This study seeks to explain that the youths' early civic and/or cultural participation in their pueblo influences them in college to identify as Zapotecos/as. In this master's thesis, I hope to address the following questions:

- How does attending college and being politically active influence young Zapotecos' reclaiming and re-creation of their indigeneity?
- What differences exist in how college youth from Oaxaca, Mexico and Los Angeles, California describe their indigenous identity?

In most cases, youth in Los Angeles are more likely to hold on to their transnational identity independently from Oaxacan (Mexico's) state discourse, showing that identity is

¹ The Oaxaca-based population is from INEGI 2010. For the Los Angeles-based estimate See, Jonathan Fox and Gaspar Rivera-Salgado, "Building Civil Society among Indigenous Migrants," in *Indigenous Mexican Migrants in the United States*, ed. Jonathan Fox and Gaspar Rivera-Salgado (La Jolla, California: Regents of the University of California and by the Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies and the Center for Comparative Immigration Studies at the University of California, San Diego, 2004), 10. Respectively, both numbers do not include Zapotecos that no longer speak the language or descendants of indigenous migrants in Los Angeles.

² Described later in the introduction much of the stereotypical and discriminatory notions of indigenous people come from preconceived notions of state creation of racial hierarchies, such has been the case of the Mexican nation state over the years.

not only a reflection of past and present history, but holds a different political and cultural dynamic within their national boundaries— Mexico and the United States.³ Therefore, this study considers that a liberal arts college education and political participation (vis-à-vis early childhood cultural and civic participation with their pueblo) are strong predictors for their indigeneity.

In the last century the Mexican state has had a strong influence in characterizing stereotypical and oftentimes discriminatory notions of indigenous people through the education system. Indigenista policies and the Mexican census have been one of the most powerful institutions in the 20th century that have enforced such preconceive notions that have excluded indigenous people and communities. These Mexican institutions have negatively affected peoples' notion of what it means to be indigenous. In the 1990s, the Oaxacan government took major steps in reforming their constitution by recognizing a multicultural state and granting indigenous rights. In this transition of law, specific educational and identity rights were granted to the fifteen indigenous groups that now live in Oaxaca.⁴ While these actions continue to be a disadvantage for indigenous self-representation, some Zapoteco college students today are proudly reclaiming their indigeneity.

As a Zapotec woman, born and raised in Los Angeles, California, much of my own story goes into these pages. My life experience growing-up as an indigenous Mexican child fueled my desire to write about the discrimination faced by youth and the aftermath now as a college student who holds an indigenous identity. My “Indian

³ Stephen 1996; Kearney 2000.

⁴ The fifteen indigenous groups that live in Oaxaca are: Zapotecos, Mixtecos, Triques, Mixes, Chinantecos, Chontales, Chatinos, Chocholtecos, Huaves, Ixcatecos, Mazatecos, Náhuatl speakers, and Zoques.

appearance” was reason enough for me to experience discrimination at school by other, mostly mestizo, Mexican children at a young age. This experience, along with having cultural and language differences, made me aware that I was not like most Mexican children, I was *different*. As a child, the traditions, culture, language, festivities, and music of my pueblos, San Jeronimo Zochina and Yatzachi el Alto, have been very significant to me. Furthermore, the participation of my parents in their hometown association (since they first migrated in the 1970s), and their drive to get my sisters and I involved as kids in Oaxaqueño events has made me acknowledge my Zapoteco-Oaxaqueña identity. More recently, being politically involved in an indigenous organization and as a graduate student in the liberal arts has made me critical of the important role that race and ethnicity play in shaping identity.

Methods and Methodology

Data for this project mostly comes from participant-observation, student presentations, and interviews in order to get current perceptions of indigenous identity. By focusing on Mexico and the United States I hope to bring a more nuance understanding where, if at all, transnational perceptions of identity change. All in-depth and informal interviews were conducted in the preferred language of the participant, either Spanish or English. These consisted of twenty-five formal and informal interviews in Mexico and seventeen in California with young men and women in their twenties and thirties.

Interviews were conducted in Chiapas at the “Seminario de Juventudes Indígenas de México.” Held in the Universidad Nacional Intercultural de Chiapas (UNICH), the three day conference touched on the following: strengthening the political role of

indigenous youth in the country, the recognition of cultural diversity, and addressing issues young adults face in their communities.⁵ Most Zapotecos in attendance were college-educated and involved in an indigenous organization or government agency. In the seminar 110 adult youth attended the conference of which the states of Chiapas and Oaxaca had the biggest turnout. Other interviews in Mexico occurred with the Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca-Comerciantes (APPO-Comerciantes), which is a smaller group from the bigger Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca (APPO). The APPO-Comerciante is a group with no major agenda organized around indigenous issues in which a small portion of their youth participants are in college. In addition, these youth have neither culturally nor civically participated in their pueblos.⁶ I keep these interviews limited to briefly show that not all youth from Zapotec descent identify as such and that the knowledge gained in college as opposed to a high school education provides them with a greater essence in proudly affirming their indigenous identity.

In Los Angeles similar work was conducted with various young members and sympathizers of the Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales (FIOB), a binational grassroots organization formed in 1991 in Los Angeles with a large Oaxaqueño presence throughout California and Mexico. Participant observation consisted in attending planning meetings for upcoming events, “Talleres de Descolonización” (Decolonization Workshops), and a reading circle led by Dr. Gaspar Rivera-Salgado. The latter brought in a discussion using academic articles on Oaxacan studies. Other participants were selected through networking sampling.

⁵ See, <http://www.undp.org.mx/spip.php?article1428>

⁶ Very few Comerciantes were college-educated and youth compared to the jóvenes in the seminar.

I learned about the Seminario Nacional in Chiapas during the Summer of 2010 right before I started my research for this project. In order to participate in the seminar there was an application process the young adults had to go through. Some of the questions they asked during the application process were: What pueblo are you representing (indigenous group you belong to)? And what social, political, cultural, educational institution or organization are you currently involved in? The fact that all youth present identified as indigenous, were involved directly with their community or were part of an organization caught my attention. It was this seminar that made me consider the role Oaxacan young adults today are having in maintaining their relationship with their pueblo, as well with more general indigenous issues. More importantly to my early interests in identity was the fact that all the youth proudly identified as Zapoteco, Mixteco, Purepecha, etc.

Furthermore, attending some of the FIOB's meetings and events in Los Angeles over the years I could see recent actions taken to incorporate second and even third-generation Oaxaqueños. While in the past three years there have been a small but growing membership of young adults raised in California (the FIOB in Fresno and Madera, California also has young members) some of these members are now part of the new binational leadership as the Binational Women's Coordinator and the Binational Youth Coordinator. Of all the Oaxacan young members in California all are college students and only two, in the case of Eduardo and Beatriz (described below), have at least one of their parents involved in the organization. This brings an added value to youths' concern with Oaxaqueño political affairs because the fact that the FIOB members and organization hold a strong identity as Zapotecos, Mixtecos, Triquis, etc. is a space of

empowerment to re-construct their indigenous identity. As well, the fact that all of the young members are college-educated and became involved in the organization during college, suggest that higher education generally and liberal arts programs specifically matter in developing their ethnic identity.⁷

Some of the questions I asked both informally and formally was: What does it mean to “be indigenous”? Are you indigenous? Why? Why not? Where were you born? Where are your parents from? Do you think that there is still discrimination towards indigenous people today? Please explain and give me an example of where you have seen or heard this. During your education have you been discriminated by your peers? At what time during your educational experience did you start taking an identity as Zapotec/a? Do you think your college education has anything to do with it? How so? What organization are you part of? Why did you get involved?

Theoretical Context

The Oaxacan migrant experience in California has been one of multiple encounters and life experiences. Unlike traditional Mexican migrants coming from low-income or working families, indigenous migrants have had to experience added challenges in their new place of settlement. Discrimination based on language, culture, and physical appearance continues to be prevalent for indigenous immigrants in the United States. Anthropologist Michael Kearney suggested that Oaxacan indigenous migrant identities were different than those of indigenous non-migrant. These differences

⁷ My interviewees were either in their last two years of undergraduate school or in graduate school. For the most part Zapotecos living in Los Angeles were graduate students.

were mostly based on cultural and political experiences.⁸ Kearney stated that Zapotec migrants “elaborate cultural expressions of themselves as indigenous peoples that are distinct from the standard definitions and expressions of indigenous identity in Mexico.”⁹ He had in mind politically active immigrants. Today, young Zapotecos, mostly children of immigrants, are appropriating an indigenous transnational identity. This identity is structured and reinforced through college curricula that analyze indigenous social movements that have given way throughout Latin America in the past decades. Such curricula help reinforce their Zapotecness, which in turn is solidified through their political involvement. Different identity perceptions that Kearney describes are still prevalent among many Oaxaqueños living in Mexico and California today.

By analyzing the relationship between a formal education (particularly in the liberal arts) and political participation of indigenous youth I hope to contribute to what Michael Kearney and Mexican Anthropologist Federico Besserer started a few years ago with Mixteco youth in northern California, adding to my study the experience of youth in Mexico.¹⁰ Kearney argues that these youth create a space for social solidarity that is at the heart of identity formation. The “third space,” as Michael Kearney describes, refers to the cultural political space in California that are shaped by immigrant Oaxaqueños’

⁸ Michael Kearney, “Transnational Oaxacan Indigenous Identity: The Case of Mixtecs and Zapotecs,” *Identities* 7: 2 (2000). He, however, was looking at a general population of non-migrant Oaxaqueños and comparing them to Oaxaqueño migrants more politically involved.

⁹ Michael Kearney, “Transnational Oaxacan Indigenous Identity,” 174-175.

¹⁰ Now, mainly researched by two graduate Mixteco students this research looks at second-generation Mixteco identity in northern California, especially as many are beginning to attend four-year universities. See, “Michael Kearney y los estudios sobre la migración,” *Colegio de la Escuela de la Frontera Norte*. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bz3abMx1iR0>. It must be clear that while there is an increase of Zapotec students, like those of Mixtecos on both sides of the border attending college, overall it is still incredibly low.

experience in both countries.¹¹ It is this “third-space” that provides individuals a sense of social cohesion through shared experiences. This place can be thought of as a “therapeutic space” (safe space) for their hybrid identities as indigenous Mexican-American college students to take place.¹² In this way I borrow Carole Nagengast and Michael Kearney’s description of ethnicity among Oaxaqueño politically active migrants as:

A social construction formed from the interface of material conditions, history, and social practice. [Ethnicity] is one way (among others) in which people define themselves and are defined by others who stand in opposition to them. Ethnicity can be a mode of expressing consciousness, of defending the status quo, or (potentially) of organizing social protest.¹³

Indeed their expression as Zapotec youth is a form of contestation between those who discriminate against ethnic minorities and those who proudly embrace their indigeneity. In some ways it is a social protest that can be both coercive and ideological. That is the fact that indigenous Mexican college students continue to identify as indigenous despite its negative connotations and rejection by others is a form of ideological protest. This gives them a sense of agency as a historically marginalized ethnic group.

In the context of Mexico, indigeneity is often-times understood as something that can easily be described. That is, one is indigenous if they have certain characteristics that include language, customs, and place of residency (rural vs. urban). Mexico-based scholars, such as sociologist Jorge Hernández-Díaz has contested these traditional forms of understanding identity in Oaxaca by looking at organizations in which people

¹¹ Kearney, “Transnational Oaxacan Indigenous Identity,” 173.

¹² The concept of a “therapeutic space” is borrowed from Federico Besserer’s study of Mixteco youth in northern California. See, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bz3abMxliR0>.

¹³ Carole Nagengast and Michael Kearney, “Mixtec Ethnicity: Social Identity, Political Consciousness, and Political Activism,” *Latin American Research Review* vol. 25 no. 2 (1990): 62.

themselves identify as indigenous.¹⁴ Hernández-Díaz's work examines how indigenous groups have organized and constructed their identity against Oaxacan state perceptions. Other work, such as that of Víctor Raúl Martínez Velásquez, Hector Díaz-Polanco and Francisco López Bárcenas describe the recent organizing of indigenous Oaxacans in Mexico. These discuss the challenges they bring to the state as they push for their own ways of constructing their indigeneity. However, they overlook the current role youth have in shaping these organizations and identity.¹⁵

In contextualizing identity I try to more broadly relate it to the Gramscian theoretical concept of state hegemony. Looking beyond the direct effects that identity brings at a macro-perspective we often ignore a critical analysis on what causes race and ethnic identity to be so quarrelsome in today's scholarly research. Even though this research takes place in Mexico and the United States I construe that analyzing transnational identities and discrimination today are better understood from past Mexican state ideological control in trying to define "what is indigenous."

In defining transnationalism as: "the process by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement" (Basch, Glick Shiller, and Szanton Blanc 1994) it is important to consider the particular and continual experience of discrimination that ethnic minorities immigrants

¹⁴ Jorge Hernández-Díaz 1996, 1998, 2006; A. Porrúa 2000.

¹⁵ In the late 1970s the Coalición Obrero Campesino Estudiantil del Istmo de Tehuantepec (COCEI) protested against then former governor. Among the most active students were university students that had come back from studying in Mexico City.

and their descendants have in the United States that fashion “transnational communities” (Oaxaca specifically) organizing efforts as indigenous.¹⁶

The content

In order to talk about the influence education has had on Zapoteco college students we first need to understand how the Mexican state has historically identified indigenous groups through childhood educational institutions.¹⁷ In the beginning of the 20th century Mexico created labeling criteria for identifying “Indianness,” which included language, clothing, and living in rural areas (LCR). Chapter two briefly examines how Mexican institutions have attempted to promote a distorted Indian image that has been perpetuated through generations. This continues to be prevalent today as being dark-skin and having cultural differences than more dominant minority groups is cause for inter-ethnic discrimination. As discussed later in this research, these were the reasons California-raised young adults distinguished themselves (via a “third-space”) from other Mexicans or Latinos. I analyze the similarities and distinctions youth on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border currently create and re-create their *Indianness* vis-à-vis a community and/or political involvement analysis in higher education.

In Chapter 1 I use Antonio Gramsci’s theoretical framework of hegemony and education to support how the Mexican state controls civil society using education as one of the main institutions to exert power over an unwanted group. In addition, I also talk about the role of intellectuals, particularly organic intellectuals, to describe that Zapoteco

¹⁶ Michael Kearney, “Borders and Boundaries of State and Self at the End of Empire,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 4; 1 (1991): 59. I will describe this further in Chapter 4.

¹⁷ Especially since these notions have been carried on by Mexican immigrants, particularly among mestizos and lighter skin Mexicans in the United States and exerted towards Oaxaqueños immigrants and their descendants.

youth are reclaiming their identity. I explain that the reclaiming of their ethnic identity occurs through their conscientization in higher education and their political/civic involvement in indigenous issues that they have grown up with.

Chapter 2 examines how two Mexican government institutions throughout the earlier half of the 20th century have influenced distorted notions of indigenous people's ethnic identity. The role of the Mexican census *Instituto Nacional de Estadística Geografía e Información (INEGI)* and *indigenista* educational policies (policies and politics from the *Instituto Nacional Indigenista* which aimed to incorporate indigenous peoples into the Mexican national image) are described to understand why some indigenous people today still deny their identity. These nationally supported actions have brought major stigmas for indigenous peoples as being uncivilized, dirty, backwards, or dumb.

The last part of Chapter 2 discusses the granting of indigenous rights in the Oaxacan and national constitution. These are mostly within an educational context which I suggest may encourage their self-identity as indigenous students. The incorporation of the 1989 "International Labour Organization of Convention 169: Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention" in Mexican legislation, has resulted in an upsurge of identity and rights for indigenous peoples throughout Mexico.

Oaxaca has been at the forefront of indigenous rights legislation, becoming the first Mexican state in 1998 to amend its constitution to officially recognize a multicultural state. More so, the diverse ethnic composition of Oaxaca and the political, as well as social conditions at the time created the ripe environment to integrate a rights discourse in the state's political agenda. The issue now is to close the gap between the

written law and practiced law as discrimination and rights violations of indigenous communities continue. Because negative perceptions and educational marginalization of youth continue, indigenous rights have not entirely been applied in relation to its educational reforms. One of the most beneficial aspects of these rights has been the support for self-identity, which has sparked a collective identity as Zapoteco. In addition, by using a rights discourse indigenous organizations and people have organized and demanded respect for their communities.

Chapter 3 focuses on my interviews with Zapoteco students in the City of Oaxaca, to draw on current perceptions of indigenous identity. A discussion of national indigenous rights and the knowledge of local policies in Oaxaca are described in order to better understand their educational circumstances and those of their community. I argue that having a high educational attainment and being politically involved has empowered these youth to appropriate an indigenous identity. However, three stereotypical characteristics were used by the students to describe their indigeneity. The fact that one speaks Zapoteco, wears traditional clothing, and comes from a rural pueblo (referred hereafter as LCR-language, clothing, rural pueblo origin) was correlated to being Indian for most youth in Oaxaca. Despite the constant use of these descriptions college Zapotecos in the liberal arts are incorporating other ways of defining their identity. These often had to do with their knowledge of indigenous history and Article 2 of the national Mexican constitution (which guarantees specific cultural, political, identity and educational rights for indigenous peoples. It also recognizes that the country has a multicultural composition). Having a college education and being politically involved added much more to it than simply these three factors.

Finally, Chapter 4 focuses on Zapoteco college students in metropolitan Los Angeles (Mid-City, Pico-Union, and South Central) area. This chapter analyzes the experiences of youth raised in “Oaxacalifornia” as they maintain a strong connection “back home,” even though they were born and raised in Los Angeles, California. These young adults have done their schooling in the U.S. In this case, previous work on transnational indigenous identity holds true today. Michael Kearney wrote that a “third sociocultural and political space popularly referred to as Oaxacalifornia” was created among Oaxacan immigrants. I argue that this same phenomena is being experienced by L.A. raised Zapotecos who appropriate their “hybrid” identity of belonging to both places.¹⁸ Almost everyone’s parents in my sample migrated during the eighties from the Sierra Juárez (also known as Sierra Norte), with others emigrating from the central valleys. All, however, have settled in the three metropolitan areas mentioned above. In California, oftentimes Oaxacan children continue to face discrimination in school by mestizo Mexican children because they are perceived as having indigenous phenotypes (i.e., dark-skin, height, and other facial features). These experiences of being different, along with cultural and political differences, are part of the transnational identity of first-generation college Zapotec students who are also involved like their Oaxacan-based counterparts.

Young Zapotecos in this particular study are reclaiming and re-constructing their indigeneity through a liberal arts education in college where they learn the histories of indigenous peoples and issues centered on the rights of indigenous populations. This study suggest that liberal arts programs specifically, like Sociology, History, Political

¹⁸ Kearney, “Transnational Oaxacan Indigenous Identity,” 173.

Science, Rural Studies, Anthropology to an extent are imperative in building their Zapoteco identity. Let us not forget that this study also suggests that youth's prior cultural and civic participation with their pueblo and their current political involvement in indigenous issues are also significant in building their indigeneity. Nonetheless, their increasing knowledge influences many youth to critically discuss and even apply these rights through their political, civic or educational involvement as first-generation college students. Their increasing awareness of indigenous Mexican history plays a vital role in their ethnic consciousness, especially because these issues are not usually taught in primary or secondary education. For Oaxaqueño college students' history and indigenous rights is important because it allows them to know not only the roots of discrimination towards indigenous peoples but how to challenge those by knowing who they are and where they come from.¹⁹ That is, being aware that they have rights as indigenous peoples encourages them to *publically* (openly and proudly) self-identify as indigenous.

It is important to remember that identity is not stable nor can it be defined in terms of absolutes. Instead I see it as something cultural, social, political, and more importantly fluid. Sociologist Cynthia Feliciano's study on children of Latin American and Caribbean immigrants found that university institutions are important because it is where ethnic and racial identities are created, especially if their parents come from low educational backgrounds.²⁰ The impact that the educational system has on ethnic formation is not only top-down. Indigenous students in these institutions are also

¹⁹ Lynn Stephen, "The Creation and Re-Creation of Ethnicity: Lessons from the Zapotec and Mixtec of Oaxaca," *Latin American Perspectives* 23:2 (1996): 17.

²⁰ Cynthia Feliciano, "Education and Ethnic Identity Formation among Children of Latin American and Caribbean Immigrants," *Sociological Perspectives* vol. 52. no. 2 (2009): 135.

affecting the curricula, contributing their experiences to an academic setting in the classroom and vice-versa.

In my findings with Zapoteco college students in Oaxaca City and Los Angeles, Oaxacan-based students were more likely than Los Angeles-raised Zapotecos to see their identity in the three distinctive ways: speaking an indigenous language, wearing traditional clothing, and living in a rural pueblo (LCR). Despite different life experiences in the U.S. and Mexico, both are organizing in their communities or through organizations that work for indigenous rights. Their political, social, cultural, and educational experiences can slowly alter their representation through state institutions, particularly in higher education, as it has been the education system that previously worked to deny their ethnicity. While it is true that the state continues to cultivate that which it “seeks to control” (exercising hegemony over the masses, particularly through early education) transnational organizations work to improve social, political, and economic conditions in order to benefit their migrant and nonmigrant communities.²¹ At the same time these organized people exercise their right to self-identity as indigenous. Thus, it is important to keep in mind that their political, social, cultural, and educational experiences can alter some, but not all of the disadvantages that still lie ahead. This goes without saying that education alone will not solve all problems, especially when more than half of indigenous students do not have a college education, but will slowly make an inclusive transition when other social factors are taken into account.

²¹ Kearney, “Transnational Oaxacan Indigenous Identity,” 191.

Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework

The relationship between the state and civil society continues to be a concern in Mexico's control of defining who is indigenous because through the educational system it continues to create racial hierarchies. To better understand it various Gramscian theoretical models are analyzed so that the aforementioned is better understood in relationship to Mexico's discrimination towards indigenous people and how young Zapoteco intellectuals are recreating and reclaiming their identity. Gramscian concepts, like intellectuals and education work hand in hand with his idea of hegemony. I briefly analyze them to compare how through education (compulsory education, standards, and national curriculum, [includes a latent curricula]) the Mexican state has exerted hegemony over indigenous people's identity, eventually creating racial and cultural hierarchies. This type of schooling however, refers to K-12 education. Eventually, for some indigenous youth who attend the university today, education becomes a place of "unity between school and life" experiences that creates their political consciousness as Zapotecos.²² These observations are made by using Antonio Gramsci's *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (2005). It is necessary to first turn to how hegemony— an ideological control of the masses in the hands of the state— works in order to bring other Gramscian concepts to light.²³

The idea of State and Civil Society refers to the power liaison between the state (mostly coercive public institutions: the military, legal system, etc.) to that of "civil

²² Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, (New York: International Publishers, 1971, 2005), 35.

²³ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 245.

society” (non-coercive: schools, cultural/civic associations, the family, churches, etc).²⁴ In Gramsci’s view the state of Italy, was so coercively and ideologically powerful prior to the Risorgimento that it controlled the peasantry and proletariat from questioning their low social position.²⁵ Gramsci explained that all public or state institutions were very political, whereas civil society or private associations were non-political. Nevertheless, he contended that civil society was controlled by state hegemony. Education was one of the most powerful civil institutions the state latently used to control the masses. For example, the educational system, as part of civil society, was ultimately controlled by the state. The type of control towards the masses, however, exerted was an ideological control.

Gramsci believed that hegemony laid in ideological and consensual control from above.²⁶ This control came from the state and could be exercised in many forms towards the masses. He held that a majority of people in society were unhappy with their social position. Unfortunately, people failed to critically question their circumstances, or organize to resolve these issues as a mass because of state ideological control (hegemony). Whether through values, norms, or beliefs Gramsci believed this supported the status quo of hegemonic power relations (e.g., the power of the Church, the Risorgimento, and the political parties of the state).²⁷ Similarly, as mentioned in Chapter 2, Mexico used civil society to lead racial and cultural hierarchical programs that promoted anti-indigenous feelings.

²⁴ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 206-210; 245-246; 257-264.

²⁵ The *Risorgimento* was the political and economic unification of Italy in the 19th century. Some argue that this unification was never entirely possible. Gramsci uses this unification moment as an example of the construction of the modern Italian State.

²⁶ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 245-246.

²⁷ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 245-270.

For example, indigenismo, both ideologically brutal and negatively influential towards the masses, was a hegemonic project pushed as part of civil society. While in the beginning its goals were not clear to some, eventually its purpose of modernizing Mexico by minimizing indigenous peoples had a devastating effect. The negative actions that arose from indigenismo demoralized indigenous people's culture, language, and every other way that constituted a "backward" Mexico. Because the educational system was ultimately controlled by the government it became the most viable way to transmit these prejudice feelings that conveyed indigenous people as inferior in the nation's image. Eventually, some indigenous and non-indigenous peoples become conscious of their low social position and organize others to reject their social circumstance. For example, Zapoteco college student (as part of the masses with a low social position) are reclaiming their indigeneity in political and social ways that go against Mexico's traditional methods of classifying indigenous people. Overall, this counter-hegemony or consciousness of the masses is imperative in understanding state and civil society. Education and intellectuals, however, are crucial in making counter-hegemony occur.

Gramsci uses hegemony to describe how state consciousness works to ideologically control the masses and proletariat. The consciousness of the state occurs at the moment it has successfully been able to influence the people and manipulate civil society for the state's benefit. In the case of Mexico, various civil institutions— the Mexican census, the educational system, the Church, and the constitutional rights for indigenous people continue to be used to decrease racial and cultural indigenous practices, thus rejecting what is Indian. While at moments in history the masses have not

exercised counter-hegemony, Gramsci contends that this is because they do not hold the counter-consciousness required.

If we look at education in Mexico, not only as part of civil society, but an institution that exerts state hegemony the educational system often helps to create and maintain racial discrimination. This discrimination ultimately leads to an unequal educational distribution for indigenous children and older youth that discourages them from going to school. For at least 100 years the Mexican nation-state has used education as place where hegemony is practiced towards the masses, but historically indigenous groups are at a greater disadvantage in the spectrum because they continue to be politically, socially, economically, and academically marginalized.

The role of education, though, is too complex to just classify it as part of civil society or a historical tool that in moments transmits ideological hegemony. In order to look at the mechanisms involved in changing education systems to more race-ethnic conscious ones we must first look at intellectual capabilities that make this happen. Gramsci believed that “all men are intellectuals, one could therefore say: but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals.”²⁸ The intellectual that does not have the function in society is less likely to be able to organize the masses. In other words, men and women can be intellectuals, but only in their capacity to take hold of certain functions in their given social position in history. Gramsci describes that two types of intellectuals exist—the *traditional* and the *organic*.

For Gramsci intellectuals are not necessarily academics but can be technicians that have an economic, social and political function in society— specifically in class. In

²⁸ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 9.

defining traditional intellectuals Gramsci describes them as those who are strongly allied to the dominant ideology of the ruling class and *separate* from political classes or class struggle—they may think themselves as autonomous to their class. Traditional intellectuals are also more universal in their representation of class—they do not necessarily associate themselves to the class they come from.²⁹ However, their alignment to the dominant class is crucial in building and maintaining hegemony. This alignment to the dominant class helps the state maintain ideological control of the masses through the manipulation of civil society. In contrast, the organic intellectual can have the ability to organize the masses and other sectors of society. This intellectual is able to understand how hegemony works and utilize their subject position to either support hegemony or work against it.

As analyzed in Chapter 2, education was the primary civil institution the Mexican state used to minimize indigenous peoples' presence. Indigenismo, as a nation-state policy and program to control race and culture, was a hegemonic practice in Mexico. This hegemonic practice also celebrates an indigenous past through the glorification of an Aztec culture and identity. Education, in the words of Gramsci, is an institution of elite ideological control over the masses. This ideological control is more felt in childhood education than at the university level. Mexico's ideological control has thus served to influence the masses through the idealization of a mestizo national image that rejects *lo Indio*. While Gramsci's concept of education is quite ambiguous it can only be understood in the theoretical framework of hegemony. Analyzing civil society, state,

²⁹ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebook*, 3-7.

intellectuals, and education independently from hegemony would simply prove fruitless to comprehend.

In contrast to traditional intellectuals, organic intellectuals represent the class they come from, whether dominant or working class.³⁰ In other words, organic intellectuals are not independent from their class, but are product of the class they were born into.³¹ As writers, journalist, lawyers, educators, and students they are invested in the political and social struggle of their class. The impact of organic intellectuals is thus far greater for society than that of the traditional. In Gramsci's words they bring with them their level position "characteristic of their class" as a way to ally to the class they come from, eventually bringing their participation into that group.³²

Unlike traditional intellectuals that sit from their office doing work, they feel a responsibility to the group they belong to and get involved with the community.³³ In this way Zapoteco college students in this research are increasingly becoming organic intellectuals because they promote strong ties to the community they come from while performing their task as college students. As first-generation college students in their family or even in their pueblo, they feel that it is an obligation to continue working for the betterment of their community. In reclaiming their indigeneity these students use their knowledge of history, rights, and childhood experience as indigenous people to demand respect for their culture and communities.

³⁰ Gramsci, *Prison Notebook*, 6. Gramsci describes that the "mass of the peasantry does not elaborate its own 'organic' intellectuals, nor does it 'assimilate' any stratum of 'traditional' intellectuals, although it is from the peasantry that other social groups draw many of their intellectuals." However, Gramsci states that "a high proportion of traditional intellectuals are of peasant origin" (6).

³¹ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 3 and 6.

³² Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 3.

³³ Ibid.

Considering their close relationship with their pueblo this also influenced Zapoteco students to reclaim their identity. In rejecting prior notions and stereotypes of their identity they go against the state's traditional forms of indigenous classification. However, these actions do not only show the functions of organic intellectuals, but those of counter-hegemony to reject the state's control over the masses.

Contrary to their early childhood education college is a space where Zapoteco in Los Angeles and Oaxaca are redefining their ethnicity through a more inclusive study of indigenous history and contemporary issues. Their identity can take place in either legally recognized ways (in the Mexican constitution) or through organically created ways that reject stereotypical ways of identifying who is indigenous. The latter, nonetheless, goes against Mexico's idea of Indian identity as historically defined, and currently associated through language, clothing, and living in a rural town.

Self-identifying as indigenous may be further described as an organic intellectual action, tied to cultural, political, and social meaning (not only class based) that affects the relationship of the state with that of the people.³⁴ Mexican state hegemony does not only stay in Mexico. The internalization of indigenous discrimination goes across borders when a person who holds such views migrates. For Zapotec college students in the United States this discrimination mostly by mestizo Mexicans follows them. However, these U.S.-raised children in the Oaxacalifornia community also organize to oppose

³⁴ See, Nagengast and Kearney 1990; Santibáñez-Orozco 1993; Omi and Winant 1994; Takaki 1994; and Aguirre and Turner 2004.

discrimination from other Mexicans and Latinos as it becomes a transnational experience.³⁵

Interestingly enough, for indigenous Mexican students in Los Angeles being merged into the Chicano/a or Aztec paradigm occurs too often and is deeply problematic. It is a major concern because it involves the same homogenistic practices of indigenismo that glorifies an Indian past.³⁶ As one L.A.-based student expressed, “Many Chicano Studies do not adequately critique the indigenista discourse and romanticized ideas of indigenous peoples continue to be perpetrated.”³⁷ The lack of knowledge feeds into a legacy of colonialism, meaning that subordinate groups have internalized a hatred of themselves deeply rooted in colonialism.³⁸

Conclusion

While Gramscian theory has a lengthy contribution to contemporary social theory, particularly in Marxian theory, race and ethnicity are left out from his analysis. For this reason my study attempts to fill these holes with the contemporary experience of my interviews with Zapotec college students in Mexico and the United States. Using Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, education, and intellectuals I have attempted to theorize the reclaiming of Zapotec student’s indigeneity in this chapter. I do this in order to help us better understand how at specific moments in history the elite in Mexico ideologically have controlled a negative perception of “being Indian.” These perceptions have helped

³⁵ Carole Nagengast and Michael Kearney, “Transnational Oaxacan Indigenous identity: The Case of Mixtecs and Zapotecs,” *Identities* 7 (2000): 173-174.

³⁶ My own italics. I say this lightly.

³⁷ Luis Sanchez-Lopez, “Oaxacalifornia en Califaztlan: descolonizando la idea de lo indígena,” *El Tequio*, 8, (2010), 6-7.

³⁸ For more on the legacies of colonialism in Third World countries see, Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (2004), *Black Skin, White Mask* (2008), as well as, Aimé Césaire’s *Discourse on Colonialism* (2000).

maintain racial and cultural hierarchies that further lower Zapotecos' social position. Due to more recent waves of ethnic migration patterns in the United States we see how ethnic discrimination, vis-à-vis early Mexican state hegemonic practices, continues to be used by the civilian population. Even though some indigenous people internalize this discrimination, others challenge these negative notions to reassert their indigeneity using their intellectual capabilities to do so. In other words, they use both the knowledge from their community and that gained in college to trace and thus counter their ethnic marginalization.

Chapter 2:

The State and Education: Influence on Indigenous Identity

As in other Latin American countries, from the early part of the twentieth century to the 1980s indigenous peoples in Mexico were forcefully pushed to assimilate as mestizos to be *Mexicanos*. This chapter discusses different events of the 20th century, as I believe these events have had a major role in ethnic identity construction. These events have led to the transformation of an indigenous self-identity. This chapter's discussion of the state's influence on indigenous identity will be important context for forthcoming chapters where Zapoteco youth debate their identity, often times in opposition to state ethnic classification. Starting with the Mexican census, I move on to discuss indigenist policies in education and then the discourse on indigenous rights: I show how different moments of these agencies have been used to form a stereotypical image of Indian identity. Gradually, such perceptions have changed over time with the advent of indigenous rights legislation. As one of the states with the largest indigenous population, Oaxaca has also had major changes in its legislation as a way to change the state's relationship with indigenous peoples in an effort to "incorporate" them in a nonassimilationist manner. However, as I will discuss in this chapter, such rights and state laws have had little effect on the overall condition of indigenous peoples—primarily because different governments have failed to abide by them.³⁹ Who exactly benefits from these rights and what constitutes an indigenous identity?⁴⁰

³⁹ While this may be true of most indigenous peoples in Latin America, I specifically describe the effect indigenous rights have towards migrant and nonmigrant Zapotecos of Oaxaca.

⁴⁰ Though I vaguely say Mexico, it also applies to Oaxaca and vice-versa. When using "state" it refers to Oaxaca, except where indicated.

In Mexico as in other countries, indigenous peoples have been among the most discriminated and marginalized groups. Words such as “dirty” and “uncivilized” are often associated with being indigenous. Simply saying one is from a *pueblo* automatically categorizes characterizes one as Indian many times. Language also leads to this assumption, in the attitude that “You speak a native language, therefore you’re Indian.” The Mexican state has discriminated against indigenous people since the 19th century, but the most notable steps to “modernize” or include the Indian in specific ways started in the 20th century.⁴¹

The Mexican Revolution created the conditions by which the Mexican government could use a discourse of poverty among peasants and Indians (especially from bandits Francisco Villa and Emiliano Zapata) and against dictatorship in order to have the support of an overwhelming peasant population.⁴² The revolution started because most Mexicans lived in extreme poverty toward the end of the thirty year rule of Porfirio Díaz, who pushed for a modernization of Mexico in the hands of a few. Many years of inequality between classes and the removal of a one-man political hegemony brought mestizo peasants and indigenous peoples together to participate in the revolution at its initiation in 1910. Those in the forefront however were not Indian, but rather mestizo peasants that identified with the lower-class.

As argued by Claudia Haake, the Revolution greatly affected indigenous communities through “the loss of their lands... which brought them closer to the

⁴¹ Nevertheless, this does not mean that they were, nor are passive agents in the transformation of their societies.

⁴² At the time peasants and Indians were more likely to be described as peasants.

assimilation or integration supposedly desired by the government(s).”⁴³ The frustration of their poor economic and political conditions brought indigenous peoples and peasants to participate in the Revolution. In the aftermath of the fight, stronger efforts of homogenization continued through indigenismo. Eventually the Revolution created an assimilation process for the peasants and other poor of Mexico to come about.

INEGI- Indigenous classification

Although the nationalist project of indigenismo formally started later, earlier efforts by the national government to define Indians started in the 1920s through INEGI (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática)—the Mexican census.⁴⁴ This government-run institution used race and the ability to speak a native language to account for indigenous population at the time.⁴⁵ As in other countries, race has been used in Mexico to categorize people historically discriminated against by the “superior” race or the powerfully elite. Even though race and language were used as components of indigeneity, the official Indian population relatively stayed the same from that reported in 1910.⁴⁶ Consequently, the categorization of Indians by the government has been used as a way to include and thereby exclude others that do not fit the national image.

By the 1930 census the government had excluded the use of race, but not of language. The use of language, however, did become more diverse, as the census

⁴³ Claudia B. Haake, *The State, Removal and Indigenous Peoples in the United State and Mexico, 1620-2000* (New York, NY: Taylor and Francis Group, LCC, 2007), 95. Haake specifically talks about the experience for Yaquis in the United States and in Mexico.

⁴⁴ Eva Sanz Jara, “La Diferencia Étnica Construida por el Estado: Identidad Nacional Mexicana e Identidad Indígena,” *Liminar. Estudios Sociales y Humanísticos* 3, no.2 (2005):103.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ There was no official census taken in 1920 due to the revolution. Instead, it took place in 1921.

differentiated between monolinguals and bilinguals.⁴⁷ In addition, for the first time it took into account children five years of age and older who spoke a native language, which is still effective today.⁴⁸ This was an attempt to adopt the constitutional call of no racial discrimination in the census questionnaires. According to INEGI, at five years of age children are able to communicate effectively and one can distinguish what their primary language is.⁴⁹ No category has been more important than language as a determinant factor which local government institutions also use to officially define who is indigenous. In this way the image of the Indian is primarily constructed.

The state's continued use of language to define a group's identity is also problematic. Using language alone creates stereotypical notions that indigenous people are only those who speak an indigenous language. In reality many Indians have lost the ability to speak their native tongue since Spanish colonialism until present. What it ends up doing is drastically reducing indigenous population's existence and self-expression. Only recently in the 21st century have actions been taken to ensure the survival of some of these languages.

Furthermore, taking away the term "race" in this fifth census of 1930 may have made it possible for certain groups to distinguish themselves differently from prior notions associated to their racial grouping. As well, it reinforces that racial formation is not biological but rather a social construction that many times has been supported by government officials. Nevertheless, while the census did take other steps to extend its

⁴⁷ Sanz Jara, "La Diferencia Étnica Construida," 103. It was also divided by sex.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Jorge Hernández Díaz, León Javier Parra Mora and Migdalia Ivone Mingüer Floreán, *Población Indígena de Oaxaca: 1895-1990* (Oaxaca, Oaxaca: Consejo Estatal de Población de Oaxaca, 1994), 4-5.

account of Indians there was little negotiation regarding what factors “comprised” indigenous ethnicity in a discourse between the state and the people themselves.⁵⁰

In 1940 and 1950 INEGI censuses not only continued to define indigenous peoples in terms of language, but also by what they wore (sandals) or did not wear (bare feet). In addition, they determined that a community was indigenous based on the social conditions they lived in (e.g., unpaved streets).⁵¹ These characteristics were believed to be indigenous “cultural traits” in both censuses.⁵² As a result, indigenous populations were counted in very conventional ways which led to them being severely undercounted.⁵³ Mexican historian, Miguel León Portilla suggests that culturally indigenous populations were four times greater than the number of monolingual or bilingual speakers of indigenous languages.⁵⁴

Even though both the 1940 and 1950 censuses used *more* “cultural” characteristics (language and clothing) these characteristics were mostly based on what the mestizo elite had come to label as indigenous identity and culture. However, rather than ascriptions, these were social conditions forced upon them in a long trajectory of marginalization. Throughout these two decades the perception grew that one was Indian if he or she dressed “traditionally” or had other “cultural traits,” such as living in a small

⁵⁰ Historically, census takers in Mexico determine if someone is indigenous, rather than the person themselves. This has primarily been done by taking into account the presence of an indigenous language spoken by the person. In addition, recently there have been movements aimed towards a more diverse representation of indigenous peoples in the Mexican census, and even in the United States census (2010). Many of these have been organized by indigenous organizations on both sides of the border to take a more inclusive account of ethnic minorities.

⁵¹ Díaz, Mora and Floreán, *Población Indígena*, 4.

⁵² It is important remember that with the 1950’s census, more so than in the forties indigenist policies were in full swing at the time.

⁵³ For example, the percentage for indigenous bilingual speakers sharply increased from the 1950s on, with exception of the sixties, but the monolingualism was decreasing.

⁵⁴ Díaz, Mora and Floreán, *Población Indígena*, 4.

pueblo.⁵⁵ These supposed cultural traits were simply stereotypes, and they remained part of the census until the late 1950s.⁵⁶ As described later in the chapter, it was also during the fifties that government-run indigenist programs aimed to incorporate indigenous groups into the national Mexican framework. In practice, however, these proved to further disadvantage indigenous self-identity because it was INEGI's classification that formally counted. Deploy

By 1960 (the thirteenth census) INEGI discontinued the use of the "cultural" classification categories of clothing, footwear and the social conditions of community. According to Eva Sans-Jara, the forties and fifties censuses confused indigenous people and other Mexicans about who to categorize indigenous, especially as a considerably large number of indigenous people were already living in the city and were being disregarded.⁵⁷ Interestingly, in the 1960s native languages alone dropped as bilingualism (Spanish and indigenous languages) increased among the indigenous sector that INEGI accounted for.

Although INEGI still uses language as a form of Indian classification, there have been movements to oppose this category and take a more diverse perspective on "Indian culture," such as a *belief and a state of being* part of an indigenous community or ethnic

⁵⁵ In using the term "tradition" or "culture" I am aware that traditions and cultural practices over the years have changed given historical situations that have interrupted various communities. Nevertheless, its continued practices are important for indigenous communities as it gives them a sense of belonging and being part of their pueblo or indigenous group.

⁵⁶ Today there are still common notions among mestizo Mexicans and some indigenous people who express racial slurs such as "Oaxaquita," "Oaxaco," or "No seas Indio," among other expressions. These forms of discrimination are more prevalent for Oaxaqueños in the United States (chapter four of this study). However, some internal Oaxacan migrants in big cities like Mexico, D.F. have also encountered discrimination and deny being from Oaxaca; see, Velasco-Ortiz, 2004.

⁵⁷ Sans-Jara, "La Diferencia Étnica Construida," 103.

group developed through their political consciousness.⁵⁸ In other words it is ones choice to develop who they are through their life experiences. Indigenous people's participation in the census may thus result in a larger population of the group because they are rejecting the definitive characteristic the Mexican state makes of their identity and incorporating others. Language stands out as the main tool INEGI continues to use to categorize the Mexican Indian population—all while Spanish continues to be fully employed in various indigenous communities today.⁵⁹ Now we turn to another way in which the state has influenced the development of indigenous identity: educational policies enacted during the forties and fifties, primarily aimed at curtailing indigenous children's education.

'Official' indigenist policies in education

In 1940 the Primer Congreso Indigenista Interamericano met in Michoacán, Mexico. Formed by various government officials of Latin America, its goals were to address the "Indian question" through the implementation of government agencies.⁶⁰ Three branches would be formed to address problems of indigenous communities. One branch was a national indigenist institute, out of which grew the *Instituto Nacional*

⁵⁸ This has also occurred in the United States' census. In 2010, indigenous groups, such as the FIOB and CBDIO in the U.S. participated in the census to get indigenous people to identify with their indigenous ethnic group.

⁵⁹ Described in chapter 2. One of the primary reasons used by youth in Oaxaca to describe their indigeneity was their ability to speak a native language.

⁶⁰ Instituto Indigenista Interamericano, "Informe de Actividades al que se refiere el Artículo 91 (f) de la Carta. Febrero de 2003 a Enero de 2004," Informe Anual del Instituto Indigenista Interamericano a la Asamblea General. (Consejo Permanente doc. Published country unknown, 2004): 2 accessed February 14, 2010, www.scm.oas.org. Also look at, Anne Doremus, "Indigenism, Mestizaje, and National Identity in Mexico during the 1940s and the 1950's" *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos*, 17 no. 2 (2001): 375.

Indigenista (INI) in 1948 in Mexico.⁶¹ The INI emerged as the most powerful indigenista institute in 1948. The beginning of a long nation-state building project, it outlined specific ways to assimilate indigenous people. Primarily in the hands of state hired anthropologists, INI used educational materials like school curricula and textbooks as venues for this assimilation project to take place with no representation of indigenous interest.

This “new” education intensified strong anti-indigenous sentiments. The INI further drew negative perceptions and stereotypes of Indians in order to “modernize” them and make their assimilation process more promising. For example, a homogenous national mestizo identity was celebrated as a folkloric *Indian past*.⁶² With the guide of anthropologist, studies were mostly conducted in pueblos that spoke a native language. Their main goal was to encourage people to speak Spanish in order for indigenous peoples to be part of modern Mexico during this national period by leaving their “backwardness” behind.⁶³

José Vasconcelos, Mexico’s foremost nationalist intellectual at the time and later the first Minister of Education, attempted to infuse a national identity in the 1920s under the popular education movement.⁶⁴ Later however, Moisés Sáenz, who some see as an indigenist advocate, pushed for *escuelas rurales* and *escuelas indígenas* while

⁶¹ This institute is of particular importance because it brings a better understanding of the relationship of the INI with indigenous communities during this time. The INI was a dominant institution that influenced a negative view of Indian people.

⁶² Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, *México Profundo: Reclaiming a Civilization* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1987, 1996) 3.

⁶³ Judith Friedlander, *Being Indian in Hueyapan: A Revised and Updated Edition* (New York, N.Y.: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 95-157.

⁶⁴ José Vasconcelos coined the term “Cosmic Race.” He used this term to refer to what he viewed as *mestizaje*. This was the mixer of two cultures coming together into one identity, the indigenous to that of the Spanish-speaking (Vasconcelos 1948).

Vasconcelos opposed them.⁶⁵ In Vasconcelos's view the purpose of these schools was to eliminate the national representation of Indians.

Forming separate schools was not what Vasconcelos envisioned for their assimilation: rather, he wanted to implement new teaching methods to force a modern mestizo Mexico at the cost of cultural assimilation of all ethnic groups. What Vasconcelos and Sáenz shared in common was the concern with reforming early national Mexican education to assimilate Indians. Despite Sáenz's influence, José Vasconcelos is most responsible for the early education legislation which almost occurred with the Education Plan of 1947. This plan was not exclusively focused on indigenous education, but its overall concern was to reform multiple education methods.⁶⁶

There were many failures in the Education Plan according to Miguel Alemán's administration, in power at the time. A major issue was that the plan's official ideology was not efficient enough to be carried in educational institutions throughout the country. The reform also aimed at peasants in the incorrect usage of peasantry as synonymous to indigenous people. The three objectives of the reform included: "effective teaching of the peasantry; improvement of the economic and sanitary conditions of peasants; and the inculcation of a civic spirit in each young peasant, [which] aimed at encouraging the view

⁶⁵ María Luisa Acevedo Conde and Margarita Nolasco, *Educación Indígena* (Mexico D.F., Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1986), 7-9 & 41-63. Eventually, most of these schools were used for Spanish literacy campaigns in the fifties.

⁶⁶ Natividad Gutiérrez, *Nationalist Myths and Ethnic Identities: Indigenous Intellectuals and the Mexican State* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 58. Vasconcelos's early educational structure plays an important role in today's education. In the 1920s he envisioned four schools—"rural school, cultural mission, indigenous school, and a rural teacher training school—as well as literacy campaign and the introduction of a program of public libraries," of which the latter still exist today (Gutiérrez, 58). Furthermore, Vasconcelos was also anticlerical in his mission to reform schools and preferred secularized institutions.

that peasants form an integral part of the nation.”⁶⁷ Described below, these teachings further fueled negative beliefs that indigenous people and peasants were a set back to the improvement of the nation. Therefore, it was necessary to implement a national education policy where the state felt it needed it the most. Some of the plans were implemented in pueblos that spoke a native language as their primary tongue.

The “effective teaching of the peasantry” occurred through the incorporation of the values of the elite into schools, as in schools Spanish only literacy programs that the INI believed had more “positive” outcomes for the country as a whole.⁶⁸ These of course were specifically implemented in K-12 schools in rural areas. With the full support of the government, the INI saw it as profitable education that would eventually spread to the rest of the community by youth from the pueblos themselves.⁶⁹ The common belief of the state was that by learning Spanish Indians would be able to fully participate in civic, political and economic rights just like other Mexican citizens. By this means, they believed that the country would “truly” advance as a modern nation.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Gutiérrez, *Nationalist Myths and Ethnic Identities*, 59. In many cases these three goals are carried on today which are used by mestizo Mexican and even other Indian students. It is also important to mention that prior to the plan there were already other education programs—Campana Nacional de Alfabetización, Instituto de Alfabetizadores Monolingües, among others later on designed to be used in indigenous education. There are some accounts that argue that by the 1940s there were clear differentiations between Indians and the rural or peasant sector, but other work shows otherwise. Indigenous and rural schools grew in the 1950s.

⁶⁸ There was also literacy teaching of their maternal language (1940-1945) as was indicated with the indigenist policies, but very few actually went through. Although Indians were grouped as peasants, I will keep referring to them as such, keeping in mind that these practices were also directed at indigenous peoples.

⁶⁹ Slightly different for indigenous elderly the function of the Catholic Church since the colonial period continued to be viable in the mid-twentieth century for their integration. This was also by pushing for Spanish language literacy for those who had never gone to school. For more on teaching see, Friedlander, *Being Indian in Hueyapan*, 116; and Grimes, *Crossing Borders: Changing Social Identities in Southern Mexico*, 1998.

⁷⁰ Scott Cook and Jong-Taick Joo, “Ethnicity and Economy in Rural Mexico: A Critique of the Indigenista Approach,” *Latin American Research Review* 30, no.2 (1995): 34.

Several literacy missions, including El Instituto de Alfabetización para Indígenas Monolingües, started functioning by 1944 and soon began employing INI's policies.⁷¹ As described by Judith Friedlander, Hueyapan—a town in the state of Morelos—people were more likely to self-identify as indigenous during her most recent visit in 2000 than they were when she first went in 1969.⁷² Friedlander suggests that this is due to a “forced” assimilation dating back to colonialism, and occurring with literacy missions in the 20th century, but by the 21st century changes in policy gradually eliminated these programs.⁷³ The missions were seen as the best way to acculturate and integrate indigenous people; they were believed to be more viable for the education and “civilization” of indigenous monolinguals.⁷⁴ Literary missions were also more practical because they used local churches to help spread the use of Castellano (Spanish) among large number of followers who had no type of education or were elders. It is little surprise then, that the role of missions to make indigenista practices reachable to all indigenous people furthered strengthen the INI's goals.

The second objective of the Education Plan that called on the need for better “economic and sanitary conditions of peasants” was seen as another obstacle for indigenous people's incorporation to Mexico and the country's development. To improve the economic conditions of “peasants,” the INI saw it was necessary to get them ready for a different, more national labor force. The Mexican elite and “popular classes” were

⁷¹ In the 1930s missions were already promoting Spanish literacy and an elitist culture.

⁷² Friedlander, *Being Indian in Hueyapan*.

⁷³ Friedlander, *Being Indian in Hueyapan*, 123-156. Among other goals of the literacy missions were to discourage old cultural customs. Argued later in this chapter, changes in policy encouraged many people to retake their indigenous identify.

⁷⁴ Gutiérrez, *Nationalist Myths and Ethnic Identities*, 95.

introduced as other methods to improve their economic condition.⁷⁵ For example, the INI believed that in order to improve its group's economy, the rural peasant had to use more modern techniques in order to move to a modern labor market. The INI believed using new labor techniques would also lead to more sanitary conditions.

In previous years the Mexican and Spanish governments had held that Indians and dirtiness were equal to each other. Years of discriminatory remarks as *sucios* (dirty) towards indigenous people were now being promoted by the state's concern for all Mexican people's health. Children, as now, were encouraged to maintain proper daily hygiene for school. For example, polished shoes and clean clothes were highly encouraged. Huaraches and wearing traditional clothing was discouraged because they were seen as unsanitary. While the intentions seemed positive, they have left an ongoing discriminatory and stereotypical image for indigenous Mexicans residing in Mexico and the United States. Discriminatory remarks as "Indian sucio" or "Huele a Indio" (It smells like Indians) are often heard today. It is important to remember that poor hygiene conditions have not always existed, nor are they experienced by the entire indigenous population. Rather they have come about through an unequal and discriminatory development of this group.⁷⁶

In a slightly different context, the curricula of textbooks assigned to children with the 1947 Educational Plan further fueled the spread of the assimilationist agenda. These textbooks encouraged a "civic spirit" among Indian children. However, the curricula did not necessarily promote indigenous children as an integral part of the nation, but rather

⁷⁵ Gutiérrez, *Nationalist Myths and Ethnic Identities*, 60.

⁷⁶ Another of these stereotypical images has been the glorification of an Indian past through the *cultural* image of an Aztec ancestry. Adopted as the most valorized image and history that the Mexican government has promoted many people, especially Chicanos, identify with it.

more general patriotism to the country. In doing this, the textbooks encouraged them to abandon their traditions and culture. As a matter of fact, even though there were curricula to promote specific indigenous history and culture in indigenist educational legislation almost no school promoted this.

These strong nationalist feelings had previously been fully included in textbooks by the late 1950s with the Eleven-Year Plan. This Plan's primary concern was in reforming elementary textbooks.⁷⁷ Legislative changes in textbooks continued over time. Even from 1960 to 1992, three collections were produced "to diffuse a single, coordinated version of national history and to provide the basic means of socialization."⁷⁸ This civic spirit was encouraged in the depiction of national heroes such as presidents and mestizo men at the forefront of Mexico's independence, thus hiding indigenous people from history. However, to only talk about the influence textbooks had in promoting a civic spirit is too simplistic. Teachers were among the key actors in promoting this civic spirit to indigenous youth.

With the help of textbooks teachers more successfully pushed for a national identity and history of the nation-state. Since the textbooks showed an "official history" of Mexico it became easier for teachers to transmit the desire for a modern homogenistic Mexico. Promoting a popular national culture in mestizaje was largely embraced by the teachers as they instilled it as a national pride among indigenous youth.⁷⁹ Another benefit

⁷⁷ Gutiérrez, *Nationalist Myths and Ethnic Identities*, 67. The plan also made first grade available to all children, and to make it popular, and accessible.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Matthias Vom Hau, "Unpacking the School: Textbooks, Teachers, and the Construction of Nationhood in Mexico, Argentina, and Peru," *Latin American Research Review* Vol. 44, No. 3(2009): 133.

for teachers was that textbooks allowed them to more easily select and present information that otherwise would be unfamiliar to them.⁸⁰

Many teachers had little knowledge of indigenous people's history and culture. Initially, they too lacked teaching experience. However, this improved as the state made teacher training one of their highest priorities. For example, their lack of teaching experience and knowledge of indigenous language, cultures, and beliefs further created problems in the Educational Plan of 1947. For this reason many teachers sent to far pueblos did not stay their given period (also given the change of urban to rural living conditions). While the teachers may not have lasted as long as planned, the education given to students was sufficient enough for some in the village to idealize a progressive Mexico—a belief instilled in them through the abandonment of their culture and beliefs.

After the youth's *successful* completion in these schools the INI expected Indian youth to take what they had learned back to their communities so that the state could more easily assimilate Indians as mestizo Mexicans. Indeed, youth became "*promotores*" (promoters) and soon teachers in their community or neighboring towns who worked to advance the national mestizo identity and culture of indigenismo. Many of these actions took place through the Centros Coordinares Indígenas which were local coordinating indigenist centers in pueblos.⁸¹ Thereby, these programs further assured that Spanish monolingualism and the values of a dominant mestizo culture set about a national Mexican urban-identity.

⁸⁰ Vom Hau, "Unpacking the School," 149.

⁸¹ Luca Citarella, "Contexto Histórico y Antecedentes de la Educación Indígena," comp., Francesco Chiodi *La Educación Indígena en América Latina: México, Guatemala, Ecuador, Perú, Bolivia* (Quito, Ecuador: P. EBI MEC-GTZ & ABYA-YALA and Santiago, Chile: UNESCO/OREALC, 1990), 25.

As the sixties continued, it proved difficult for the state to carry-on ethnic and cultural discrimination through the indigenist educational policies. Anti-colonial protests, student and anti-war movements, as well as other movements against repressive governments around the world fueled strong opposition by a number of people.⁸² Visions of decolonizing the Mexican nation-state by refusing anti-indigenista policies and politics surged during the seventies. The new wave of anthropologist and native intellectuals created a movement which rejected traditional ways of Indian classification. Many of these intellectuals were against further government influence on indigenous identity and its efforts to create racial and cultural hierarchies.⁸³ Their approach incorporated a socioeconomic, as well as political lens, to study indigenous and mestizo relations. At this time, literature discussing world affairs and inconformity used phrases such as “internal colonialism” to refer to the imbedded roots of discrimination and prejudice feelings people have of others and themselves.⁸⁴ Such anti-movements continued well into the eighties.⁸⁵

Indigenous rights at the local level

In 1989 indigenous rights was established through the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention 169 of the International Labour Conference (Organización

⁸² For example, in the United States it was the Black, Chicano, feminist, anti-war movement, and later the American-Indian movement; in Mexico, the student movement for the massacre in Tlatelolco and later the opposition to indigenismo; and throughout the world there was support for the Civil Rights movement in the U.S and discontent for its foreign policies and coercive interventions in other countries.

⁸³ One of the movement’s prominent representatives, Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, and other similar intellectuals heavily critiqued indigenismo and moved from a colonial anthropology approach to a de-colonial one.

⁸⁴ For a more thorough discussion on internal colonialism and anti-colonial theory see Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (2005) and Fanon, *Black Skin, White Mask* (2008).

⁸⁵ Also in the early eighties Mexico saw itself in one of its biggest economic crisis, popularly known as the *devaluación del peso*. During this time the poverty sector increased and many more Mexicans found themselves living in the streets. Indigenous Mexicans already among the worst economically were severely affected.

Internacional del Trabajo-OIT).⁸⁶ Indian people took part in meticulously drafting the new rights that Mexico soon ratified into the 1992 national constitution, taking major steps as they became the first Latin American country to recognize multiculturalism through the celebration of racial, ethnic and cultural differences. Three years later Oaxaca first recognized *usos y costumbres* (a traditional form of governance) in their local constitution. Another three years went by before in March 1998 Oaxaca took yet another step for the recognition and rights of indigenous peoples (also drafted by Convention 169) in their constitution. The state passed legislation known as the Ley de Derechos de los Pueblos y Comunidades Indígenas del Estado de Oaxaca, recognized under the LVI Legislatura del Estado de Oaxaca and commissioned by Comisión Permanente de Asuntos Indígenas deals with indigenous legislation and issues pertinent to the state of Oaxaca.

Similar to the indigenous article of the national constitution, Oaxaca's article starts by recognizing its multicultural existence composed of fifteen ethnicities.⁸⁷ During this time the legislation also reports that more than sixty percent of its population is indigenous. The description of its multicultural composition goes as follows:

Aquí lo indígena es cotidiano, sus manifestaciones son palpables en todas partes: en el gobernar, en la cultura, en la vida social y política [...] Estas situaciones, que han existido siempre en los hechos, han encontrado hoy un referente legal.⁸⁸

Here the indigenous is a way of life, their manifestations are palpable in every place: in governance, in culture, in the social and political life [...] These situations, that have always existed in practice, have found today a legal referent.

⁸⁶ The prior convention took place in 1957.

⁸⁷ Moisés J. Bailón (Delegate), "Ley de Derechos de los Pueblos y Comunidades Indígenas del Estado de Oaxaca," in *Cuadernos de la Comisión Permanente de Asuntos Indígenas*, ed. Victor L. Juan Martínez. (México: LVI Legislatura del Estado de Oaxaca: 1998), iv.

⁸⁸ J. Bailón (Delegate), "Ley de Derechos," iv. All Spanish block quotes are immediately followed by its English translations. These are my own translation.

Legally, the state of Oaxaca ensures that daily indigenous actions and movement are now protected by the government. The local state recognition for indigenous people to continue manifesting their culture, political, and social practices provides spaces where they can more freely affirm their indigeneity. That is, if we look at indigenous social movements these have increasingly sprung-up in the last twenty years since the development of indigenous rights in Convention 169. At the same time these movements have organized by using the notable rights and indigenous identity discourse as stated in Convention 169.⁸⁹ Indeed, indigenous manifestation and rights have paved the way for some advancement in recognizing indigenous self-identity and deconstructing prior state notions associated to them.⁹⁰

It goes without saying that there are different perspectives regarding multiculturalism or pluriculturalism.⁹¹ Some see official multicultural recognition as an indication of inclusion and progress for indigenous peoples (Kymlicka 2007). For example, indigenous social movements may use multiculturalism as a way to demand their rights and indigeneity. In contrast, other people see it as a bandage the state strategically employs to continue perpetuating violence, power and racism toward indigenous peoples (Hale 2006; Postero & Zamosc 2004; Chomsky 2009). For this reason a critical analysis is taken below in order to show how state multiculturalism affects indigenous communities and people. The latter point demonstrates how

⁸⁹ See, Postero & Zamosc 2004; Hale 2004; Hale 2006; Chomsky 2010.

⁹⁰ Prior to constitutional Indian rights, Oaxaca was already a scene of demonstrations, but its participation was more class and *peasant* based, instead of ethnically or racially recognized. In other words, demonstrations were seen as a discontent of the worker and the racial subordination of these groups was merely in question. Common discontent was over community owned land disputes with the government or educational inequality of which middle-class and mestizo teachers were at the forefront.

⁹¹ Shannon Speed, "Dangerous Discourses: Human rights and multiculturalism in neoliberal Mexico," *PolAR- Political and Legal Anthropology Review* vol. 28, no.1 (2005).

multicultural recognition has flaws in a country where state violence and economic market policies limit the exercise of indigenous rights and strengthens racial and cultural hierarchies.

The formal recognition of pluriethnic citizenry and economic reforms has major sociopolitical consequences, particularly for indigenous people. These consequences are vis-à-vis the implementation of neoliberal and multicultural policies, which Charles Hale calls, “neoliberal multiculturalism.”⁹² Simply from being a free global market that promotes economic growth, as some contend, neoliberalism is a tool designed by political and economic elite to privatize and thus end government public institutions and social welfare.

According to Hale, the use of neoliberalism and multiculturalism under one state transforms indigenous cultural rights by further allowing violence towards indigenous people to continue when these people demand respect from the government.⁹³ Because indigenous groups are still seen as a lower class, little importance is given to them as Mexican citizens. The history of their ethnic, cultural and language position has put them in a great disadvantage that is still looked upon down by many mestizos and political elite.

Hale argues that their different position from the dominant racial group has over time shifted racial perceptions because more than racial or ethnic differences go into discrimination. He calls these “classic racism” and “new cultural racism.”⁹⁴ Classic

⁹² A pioneer in neoliberal multiculturalism, Hale extensively studies state politics in indigenous Central America, particularly in Guatemala.

⁹³ Charles Hale, *Más que un Indio: Racial Ambivalence and Neoliberal Multiculturalism in Guatemala* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: School of American Research, 2006).

⁹⁴ Hale, *Más que un Indio*, 210.

racism, Hale describes, is an act of racial hatred from the Ladino “perpetrator” to an individual; in the case of Mexico, the mestizo being the perpetrator and the Zapoteco the individual.⁹⁵ He defines that classic racism is a discriminatory act based on race (skin color or phenotype). Nevertheless, Hale argues that these acts are far from gone, and have been *successively* disguised under (neoliberal) multiculturalism and the implementation of rights.⁹⁶ In contrast, *new cultural racism* is expressed as discrimination towards cultural differences.⁹⁷ In the case of indigenous Oaxacans, speaking their native language, dressing traditionally, and coming from a small rural pueblo are seen as cultural differences which have been used by the Mexican state at one point or another. This is similar to my research findings among college educated youth who live in Oaxaca City but whose parents migrated from a rural pueblo. Charles Hale contends that people often point to their cultural differences to explain why indigenous people *remain* in “inferior social positions.”⁹⁸ For example, in my study youth who are neither in college or politically involved saw their lack of cultural differences as reasons why they are not Zapotecos. They strongly rejected being indigenous or did not correlate their ethnicity as a reason for their low social position, even when their parents come from indigenous pueblos where they still partake in many traditions and cultural practices.

Educational reforms under the indigenous rights legislation in Oaxaca, especially as the state has one of the country’s lowest educational attainments, are essential to

⁹⁵ Ibid. Ladinos are the dominant racial group in Guatemala.

⁹⁶ In Mexico multiple acts of racial and ethnic discrimination occurred under *Indigenismo*, while in the United States there was the Jim Crow era. The Jim Crow laws were race-based discriminatory in many southern states that supported ‘separate but equal’ public places and institutions—such as schools; this was from the late 1800s to late 1900s.

⁹⁷ Hale, *Más que un Indio*, 210.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

analyze. Some of the important reforms to consider are the recognition that children have the right to cultural and bilingual education (in their respective indigenous language), as well as guarantees them their right to develop their indigeneity as they wish, my greatest concern here. Some questions to ask regarding the reforms are: How has this legislation been used to shape educational reform? How often are its provisions ignored? Are they benefiting people in a state with a long and mostly illiterate population who is unable to read about their constitutional rights? The Ley de Derechos de los Pueblos y Comunidades Indígenas del Estado de Oaxaca, Capítulo IV- De la Cultura y la Educación (of Culture and Education) has thirteen articles that pertain to indigenous rights (Article 15 to 27). Very few of these educational reforms guarantee their right for self-identity. Described below, these are based on the rights for their cultural and language recognition to live free from discrimination.

Article 15 briefly begins by saying that it is a cultural right for indigenous people to continue practicing their culture as they have done for hundreds of years. The article asserts that indigenous people and communities have the right to live securely as a distinct culture and “gozar de plenas garantías contra toda forma de discriminación.”⁹⁹ As part of the educational legislation it affirms that indigenous cultural practices in schools should be freely exercised without the fear of any type of discrimination. This law may provide some comfort for children whose family still carries out various traditions understood as indigenous today but are ridiculed at school for doing so. For example, this law applies to children who experience first-hand discrimination by their peers or school officials for being indigenous. While the article is very brief the following article (16)

⁹⁹ J. Bailón (Delegate), “Ley de Derechos de los Pueblos,” 35.

explains which cultural rights are guaranteed. In addition, it describes that those found committing the following violations will be punished by the law:

II.- Al que atente contra la integridad física, salud, o reproducción de los integrantes de los pueblos y comunidades indígenas con el propósito de destruirlos total o parcialmente;

III.- Al que fomente de manera coercitiva y por medio de la violencia o el engaño la asimilación de los integrantes de los pueblos y comunidades indígenas a otras culturas o modos de vida; o motiven su dispersión a través de desplazamientos o separaciones involuntarias de sus familias o de sus territorios.

II.- He who attempts against the physical, health, or integral reproduction of the members of indigenous people and communities, with the purpose of completely or partially destroying them;

III.- He who coercively promotes and through violence or lies for the assimilation of members of indigenous communities and people to other cultures or forms of life; or encourages their dispersion through displacements or involuntary separations of their families or territories.

According to the law anyone found violating this legislation is to be reprimanded through imprisonment. Violating them through physical integration, health or reproductive growth are attempts to completely or partially eliminate indigenous people's existence. In addition, it is prohibited to lie to them, or coercively and violently treat them in order to assimilate indigenous people and communities to other cultures or forms of life. These prohibitions are meant to include indigenous people's way of life and cultural differences by acknowledging their right to live as they wish.

Unfortunately, these rights are too often ignored. Enforcing them would not only help prevent people from using negative remarks but it would make the retaking of a self-identity more probable among indigenous students in the educational pipeline. In addition, studies have shown that people in schools or any other type of institution or organization are more likely to take on an indigenous identity when their issues and rights

are addressed.¹⁰⁰ Only recently, some of the ways in which these rights have been realized are through the upsurge of indigenous language courses, particularly in escuelas indígenas, escuelas rurales, and Universidades Interculturales throughout Mexico.¹⁰¹

Only Article 19 mentions identity as a social right to maintain. This article gives a brief description that the state cannot impose their own identity standards to classify who is or who is not indigenous. Taking away indigenous peoples autonomy to self-identify as such is unconstitutional according to the legislation in Oaxaca. The Article reads as follows:

Los pueblos y comunidades indígenas tienen derecho social a mantener y desarrollar sus propias identidades, incluyendo el derecho a identificarse a sí mismos y a ser reconocidos como tales.¹⁰²

Indigenous people and communities have the social right to maintain and develop their own identities, including the right to self-identify as they wish and to be recognized like so.

As this article suggest understanding identity as something positive to maintain is more visible today than before. This optimistic understanding of identity is clearly seen in the changing way first-generation young adults are re-claiming their indigeneity. For once, the right to manifest their identity in a non single way incorporates the urban and contemporary experience of indigenous adult-youth from prior stereotypes associated to them. For example, the absence of language and wearing traditional clothing in the article— as a way to classify them— is crucial for those who no longer practice these

¹⁰⁰ Michael Kearney, “Transnational Oaxacan Indigenous Identity: The Case of Mixtecs and Zapotecs,” *Identity* (2000), 189. Kearney’s focus is more on organizations than schools. Also see, Sylvia Schmelkes, “Las universidades interculturales en México: ¿Una contribución a la equidad en educación superior?” *Educación Intercultural* (2009), 14-15 accessed April 13, 2011.

¹⁰¹ See chapter 3 for a description of Universidades Interculturales. Many indigenous communities have promoted the teaching of their respective language as a way to maintain their identity and ethnic survival.

¹⁰² J. Bailón (Delegate), “Ley de Derechos de los Pueblos,” 36.

traditions, but nonetheless identify as indigenous. The importance of these rights lies in future generations reclaiming their indigeneity. For many of them it is a political, cultural and/or social tool that attempts to break with state control of ethnic minorities.

Article 24 guarantees that indigenous children have the right to basic formal bilingual and intercultural education. It states that through the *Ley General de Educación* (Article 3) y de la *Ley Estatal de Educación* of the national constitution, indigenous communities and people have the right to establish their own educational institution. These educational institutions will teach them their own languages within the legal framework. Article 24 further considers that parents have a right to socially participate in their children's education:

El Estado, por conducta de sus instancias educativas garantizará que los niños y niñas indígenas tengan acceso a la educación básica formal bilingüe e intercultural [...] Artículo 3 de la Constitución Política de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos, de la *Ley General de Educación* y de la *Ley Estatal de Educación*, tendrán derecho a establecer y participar en los sistemas educativos, para la impartición de de la enseñanza en sus propias lenguas dentro del marco legal, incluyendo la participación social de los padres de familia y de las comunidades en el sistema educativo de sus escuelas.¹⁰³

The estate, through its behavioral request in education guarantees that indigenous boys and girls have access to basic formal bilingual and intercultural education [...] Article 3 of the Political Constitution of the Estados Unidos Mexicanos, from the General Law of Education and the State Educational Law, will have the right to establish and participate in the educational systems, for the important teaching of their languages within the legal framework, including the social participation of parents and of the communities in the educational system of their schools.

The state's concern to ensure indigenous children's right to basic formal education only meets the bare requirements of the nation. Because the Mexican state requires that

¹⁰³ Delegate Bailón. "Ley de Derechos de los Pueblos," 38.

children have at least an elementary education (known as, educación básica) indigenous children are only encouraged to the minimum standards. Although the following chapter looks at this situation more closely, a growing population in Mexico is now barely finishing middle school (secundaría). Unfortunately, indigenous children and the state of Oaxaca are at the lowest national rank. The guarantee to formal education that encourages their ability to continue speaking their native language and practice their cultural traditions is perplexed under laws that have only minimally been enforced. As a result, parents and communities involved in the educational system of their local schools get weighed down. The lack of sufficiently prepared schools and in some cases teachers only transpires the “survival of the fittest” evolution in which indigenous children and families hold the lowest position.

In the final analysis of “De la Cultura y la Educación” of Oaxaca’s constitution, Article 25 focuses on the state’s role in eliminating any form of discrimination and prejudice feelings in the education system and the legislation. It describes that the state will act against that which denigrates indigenous people and communities as a way to eliminate them. Instructors are in charge of making sure tolerance, understanding, and the construction of a new equitable relationship between indigenous communities and people goes as follows with all sectors of the Oaxacan society:

El Estado, a través de sus instancias educativas en consulta con los pueblos y comunidades indígenas, adoptará medidas eficaces para eliminar, dentro del sistema educativo y en la legislación, los prejuicios, la discriminación y los adjetivos que denigren a los indígenas. Las autoridades educativas promoverán la tolerancia, la comprensión y la construcción de una nueva relación de equidad entre los pueblos y comunidades indígenas y todos los sectores de la sociedad oaxaqueña.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 38.

The state, through its educational instances in consultation with indigenous people and communities, will adopt effective measures to eliminate, within the educational system and in the legislation, prejudice feelings, discrimination and adjectives that denigrate indigenous people. The educational authorities will promote tolerance, comprehension and the construction of a new equitable relationship between indigenous people and communities and all sectors of Oaxacan society.

Obtaining indigenous peoples and their communities' consent is one of the most important steps to uprooting institutional discrimination that has historically beleaguered them. Because a lot of the anti-indigenous rhetoric and other propaganda comes from state sponsored indigenist programs in education, taking into account their thoughts and opinions is fundamental. Furthermore, the efforts to build a new relationship where Indians can be incorporated as different, yet unique, can contribute to their *auto-definición* and development as students.

By further analyzing Article 25's impact on the education system we ask how these apply to the type of schooling aimed at indigenous children. For example, some of these schools such as escuelas rurales or escuelas indígenas, or even schools in the City of Oaxaca are designed to cater to indigenous children's needs.¹⁰⁵ Rural and indigenous schools, however, are mostly located in rural areas, making it seem as if Indians are only those found in rural communities. In the minds of many, the idea of an urban Indian is practically nonexistent.¹⁰⁶ If the school curricula incorporated indigenous history and

¹⁰⁵ In some pueblos it is common to have only an elementary school, especially since it is Mexico's standard educational attainment. For children and parents that can afford sending their children to the next level (middle school, high school and in very few cases even college) they have to go to the nearest pueblo with those schools available and to the city if they are going to college.

¹⁰⁶ In this study I found that Oaxaqueños raised in Oaxaca City, who are neither politically involved with an indigenous organization or university educated, were more likely to think of themselves as non-Indians. They referred to Indians as those who live in rural areas, speak Zapoteco, and dress traditionally. Migrant Oaxaqueños in Los Angeles, including second generation, hold on to their Indian identity as Zapotecos, but not necessarily through the descriptions that Mexico-based youth do.

culture, the move from indigenismo would prove more positive for the development of indigenous communities' indigeneity. The same would need to be incorporated into the overall basic education of indigenous and nonindigenous children living in cities. By equally applying methods that not only educate children about their history, culture, but struggle for indigenous rights and recognition challenges racial and cultural hierarchies that continue in Mexico and even in the United States.

Conclusion

Indigenous peoples, as part of an officially recognized citizenship, respond to their continued marginality both at *home* and in their place of settlement. Ongoing negative representation of indigenous peoples by government institutions and some mestizo elites has resulted in discriminatory and stereotypical actions against these groups today. An inheritance from colonialism, Mexico's history of discrimination against indigenous peoples is very similar to the United States' historical discrimination towards Native Americans and other racial and ethnic groups. Through policies and politics of exclusion both countries have created racial and cultural hierarchies that minimize those who are not of lighter skin complexion or have different cultural traditions than those of the elites.

Language, as one of the principal ways of indigenous classification in the Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía, e Informática (INEGI) has been very important in the minimization of indigenous populations. Even though INEGI has gone through various changes in classifying or "declassifying" people as indigenous the ability to speak an indigenous language has been for most in this process. Cultural differences are barely considered as components that may also make up their ethnic identity. Since there is little

autonomy for indigenous people to choose how they are classified in the Mexican census (the census taker asks if they speak Zapoteco, Mixteco— depending where they live) those who speak an indigenous language are automatically identified as indigenous. Meanwhile, those who do not speak an indigenous language are seen as “descendants” or mestizos. Doing this violates the indigenous rights set in the Ley de Derechos de los Pueblos y Comunidades Indígenas del Estado de Oaxaca (Article 19) that guarantees their self-identity.

The former Instituto Nacional Indigenista (INI) enforced many stereotypical and discriminatory policies and programs to assimilate indigenous communities into a hegemonic identity as Mexicans. The implementations in the educational institutions are hard felt today as indigenous students and communities struggle against these preconceived notions that enforce their ethnic subordination. Because the educational system carried out homogenistic and nationalist curricula many indigenous children internalized a feeling of embarrassment by denying their indigenous ethnicity, as demonstrated in the following chapter. In 2003 the INI changed its name to the Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas-CDI as an attempt to rescue the few indigenous languages that exist today.¹⁰⁷ The CDI has gone a long way in changing how the state deals with the Indian question but much work still lies ahead in embracing and incorporating cultural rights and the right for self-identity in the educational system.

It has been twenty years since Mexico adopted the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention in their national constitution and almost fifteen years since Oaxaca reformed

¹⁰⁷ See, http://www.cdi.gob.mx/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&id=39&Itemid=56 for more information.

its constitution to include these rights. However, with its large indigenous population (more than 1,165,186 people) Oaxaca continues to be among the poorest and most marginalized states of Mexico.¹⁰⁸ Today, almost twenty years since its amendment in the national constitution and seventeen years since its local reform, it would be erroneous to say that indigenous peoples today overwhelmingly enjoy better social conditions than before. Political manifestations, a large portion of them being organized around indigenous issues, are consistently visible in Oaxaca, reflecting the ongoing struggles. Unfortunately, instead of respecting their right to manifest the state has responded violently against protestors. The government has done very little negotiation with indigenous peoples to improve their conditions, as evident in the Oaxaca demonstrations of 2006.¹⁰⁹

The following chapter shows how some Zapoteco adult-youth living in the City of Oaxaca still hold onto their indigeneity. For this reason, adult-youth in higher education play a central role in the way they self-define as indigenous. History, their educational experience in college, as well as their prior participation with their community persuades many of them to develop their ethnic identity while in college. Interestingly, these experiences have resulted in instability in their identity—the inability to singly define themselves through language or cultural traditions and reclaim their rights. Different from Chapter 2, the following chapter includes ethnographic research in the City of Oaxaca. It

¹⁰⁸ I speculate that it is more than the given population since the population numbers reflect those of INEGI 2010 and the Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas de México (CDI) 2002. Both institutions measure these groups specifically by language.

¹⁰⁹ What started out as an annual teacher sit-in by a progressive left teacher's union, Sección 22, soon gained sympathy from indigenous and non-indigenous residents in Oaxaca. This was after then Governor Ulises Ruiz coercively repressed them with bull-dozers and teargas from the federal police. Many of the teachers came from *escuelas indígenas* in small or rural pueblos demanding adequate school supplies, facilities to teach in, and a better salary. Until January 2011 the Revolutionary Institutional Party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional-PRI) uninterruptedly ruled Oaxaca for more than seventy years.

consist of formal and informal interviews, as well as field research with various Oaxaqueño college students who are politically or civically active in indigenous issues.

Chapter 3:

Zapoteco Youth Identity Formation in Oaxaca City

Previous studies of indigenous Oaxacans argue that an indigenous consciousness contingently emerges at the U.S.-Mexico border.¹¹⁰ Recent studies argue differently, as a collective identity has grown in the *home* state.¹¹¹ Compared to twenty years ago, today identifying as indigenous has become more acceptable for migrant and nonmigrant Oaxaqueños. Language, physical appearance and growing-up in a rural pueblo (all markers historically used by the government to define their identity) are primary indicators expressed by young adults to describe their identity. In this chapter I analyze how Zapoteco young adults in the City of Oaxaca reclaim their indigeneity while being in college and politically active in indigenous issues.¹¹² The student's high level of educational achievement, and their experience in higher education impact their indigeneity in different ways as they too influence the approach academia has had in their communities. Consequently, this chapter takes two approaches to how "being Indian" in Oaxaca is defined for Zapoteco college students—through nation-state discourse and a liberal arts college education. The latter of which is my particular focus in this study as it has influenced Zapoteco students to reconstruct their identity differently from before. In many ways higher education has given them a thorough teaching of their past and present history, as well as their constitutional indigenous rights.

¹¹⁰ Michael Kearney and Carole Nagengast, "Mixtec-Ethnicity: Social Identity, Political Consciousness, and Political Activism," *Latin American Research Review* vol.25, no. 2 (1990): 62 accessed March 6, 2011; and Michael Kearney, "Transnational Oaxacan Indigenous Identity: The Case of Mixtecs and Zapotecs," *Identity* vol. 7, no. 2 (2000): 174-175.

¹¹¹ Stephen 1996; Hale 1997; Escárcega-Judge 1997; Hernández Díaz 1998; Fox et al. 1999; Porrúa (ed.) 2000. I will use "home" in this chapter but more constantly in the following chapter to refer to Oaxaca.

¹¹² Most of the Zapoteco youth were either majoring in Anthropology, History, Political Science, Sociology, or even Rural Studies.

This chapter is broken down in three sub-sections. The first section, “Juventudes Indígenas de México” seminar contains my interviews and presentations with Zapotecos. The second part, “Indian Authenticity?: Language, Clothing, Rural Pueblo (LCR)” contains my interviews with other college Oaxaqueño students that do not identify with their parent’s Zapotec background and use their lack of these three descriptions (language, clothing, and living in a rural pueblo) to disassociate from being indigenous. This section is meant to show how the influence of the Mexican state still persuades many people to stereotype and classify indigenous people into such categories. Finally, the last section, “College Education Structure” briefly analyzes some of the changes in Oaxacan college education. This section attempts to give the reader a better understanding how higher education for Zapotecos has played a role in reclaiming their indigeneity.

It is important to recognize that not all Oaxaqueños are indigenous or take on an indigenous or Zapoteco identity. They may not necessarily have a collective consciousness of themselves as Zapotecos. As mentioned in the introduction, I do not attempt to define what “being indigenous” is. Rather, I argue that we cannot define identities in stagnant ways because doing so replicates the nation-state’s stereotypical and discriminatory ways of looking at indigenous peoples. In addition, doing so brings the power of the state to continue categorizing “whose who.” Using traditional clothing, speaking the native language, or looking at indigenous community’s infrastructure (described as rural) should not set defined characteristics that describe indigenous people and communities.

For example, when I asked Doña Eli, a 75-year-old woman in the Sierra Juárez if she spoke Zapoteco she replied in affirmation.¹¹³ I then asked if she was indigenous, to which she said, “Sí, ¿no? Creo, es lo que dicen pues, yo ni se.” When pushed on Doña Eli’s comment she said that the census takers usually ask her if she speaks Zapoteco or any other indigenous language. Doña Eli’s story shows that not all people that speak an indigenous language see themselves in a collective identity as indigenous and that without their acknowledgement others have power over their identity.

In this chapter more than half of the college youth migrated from their pueblos to the City of Oaxaca during their early childhood years. Of those many came with family or other relatives in search for better economic opportunities. Other youth migrated by themselves at a later age to attend college since these institutions are absent in their village. Described shortly, being raised in a rural or urban area greatly determines how youth see their identity as either indigenous or non-indigenous. The interviews in this chapter were obtained from formal and informal interviews, presentations and dialogues during the Juventudes Indígenas de México seminar.¹¹⁴ I have also added a few conversations I had with college and non-college-educated Zapotecos that identified as mestizos and are part of the APPO-Comerciantes in Oaxaca City—a grassroots group composed of street vendors.¹¹⁵

“Juventudes Indígenas de México” national seminar

¹¹³ Based on a 2008 interview in San Jerónimo Zoochina, located in the Sierra Juárez (north of Oaxaca City).

¹¹⁴ Three Oaxaqueños came from California; one Mixteco and two Zapotecos.

¹¹⁵ Even though they identified more as mestizos many of their family’s cultural practices and language come from Zapoteco traditions.

From August 3, 2010 to August 5, 2010 the indigenous youth conference, “Fortalecimiento de Liderazgos Políticos y Sociales de las Juventudes de México para el Desarrollo Humano, el Ejercicio pleno de sus Derechos y la Construcción del Estado Plurinacional” was put together by national and international agency programs in Mexico.¹¹⁶ The seminar was held in the Universidad Nacional Intercultural de Chiapas (UNICH) in San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas.¹¹⁷ This was the third youth conference held in Latin America; the first one being in Guatemala and the second one in Ecuador.

For the next three days the seminar started with an introduction of scholars, activists or government agency workers as panelist. They gave presentations that guided the young adults (from ages eighteen to late twenties) about the theme of the workshops they broke into late in the morning. At the end of each day everyone gathered in the auditorium to present possible solutions to their community’s issues as had been discussed in the workshops.¹¹⁸ Analyzed from all of the workshops was the leadership position the youth took as they discussed solutions to their community issues and as they too shared what they wanted to gain and take back to their communities from this seminar as self-identified indigenous students.

¹¹⁶ Special thanks to the selection committee for giving me the chance to take part in this important seminar, as well as to all Mexican indigenous youth participants, especially migrant and nonmigrant Oaxaqueños for sharing their stories. The national seminar was sponsored by Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo en América Latina y el Caribe; the Fondo España-PNUD, the office of the PNUD in Chiapas, Congreso de Educación Indígena e Intercultural (CNEII), Secretaría de los Pueblos Indios (SEPI), Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas (CDI), Universidad Autónoma de Chiapas (UNACH), the Universidad Intercultural de Chiapas (UNICH), among other organizations.

¹¹⁷ Institutions and organizations that put the conference together are designed to promote indigenous peoples political participation in different government and nongovernment programs, including grassroots organizations.

¹¹⁸ On the last day of the conference a female and male youth were chosen by the youth to represent them at the United Nations Indigenous Rights conference to be held November of the same year in Guanajuato, Mexico.

On the first day, Zurayda, a Zapotec woman expressed her concern to a comment stated by one of the panelist: “la pobreza de los indígenas gravemente impide su desarrollo.” She expressed that while it is important to talk about the issues that mostly affect indigenous communities it is also important to stress positive aspects too. Her opposition to the panelist’s comment was expressed the following way:

Estamos cansados de que traten de definirnos como indígenas en formas que nos oprimen. Nuestras comunidades sí están desarrolladas. Tenemos desarrollo cultural, artesanal, lingüísticos y muchos más.

We are tired of being defined in ways that oppress us as indigenous people. Our communities are developed. We have cultural, artisan, linguistic development and much more.

For Zurayda her indigeneity involved a cultural perspective that allowed for their development as indigenous people and communities. Indigenous cultures, languages, and other traditions she expressed offer so much for “our” communities and country’s development as a whole. The importance of self-sufficiency was an important factor in determining through culture, language and artistic expression their identity. In choosing their own characteristics it also denies negative descriptions and labels that further marginalized indigenous people.

In addition, Zurayda, like many of her peers described the importance of history. She explained that there were many benefits in being aware of their history as indigenous Mexicans, “no nada más nos dejó saber de nuestras costumbres pero también de donde viene la discriminación.” For Zurayda knowing indigenous history was important in reclaiming her own identity. Her awareness of this made Zurayda gain confidence and

empowerment in retaking her identity by rejecting negative connotations like, “incivilizado,” “sucio,” or “atrazado.”¹¹⁹

The eagerness to represent indigenous communities as developed according to their own ideas of development continued to resonate in every youth during the three day seminar, described below. While it is true that indigenous peoples are still among the most marginalized in Mexico (especially for Oaxaca, Chiapas and Guerrero), it is also true that politically active jóvenes like Zurayda are increasingly questioning these perceptions as they reach college. The comments and ideas made by students, conference organizers, and university instructors as panelists was significant to the extent that each brought forth their thoughts and suggestions that their various experiences allowed for.

Article 2 of the Mexican Constitution which guarantees indigenous rights, was frequently mentioned in asserting their indigeneity. One young man described, “Como declara el Artículo 2 de la constitución [national constitution], son nuestros derechos como indígenas al no ser discriminados, y auto-definirnos como querramos.” Using a rights discourse the jóvenes in the conference were more critical in using language, traditional clothing, and their rural origin as some but not the only reasons to describe their indigeneity.

Zapoteco student’s previous involvement with their pueblo was also a factor that described the close relationship and importance it had in building their identity as Oaxaqueños— although not particularly indigenous. At a workshop Jaime, a Zapoteco, expressed that as politically active college students it was their obligation to make sure

¹¹⁹ Described in chapter 1 many of these negative connotations have been supported by the state, eventually influencing other Mexican people.

that indigenous rights be respected. He expressed that since many indigenous youth did not have a college education it was a responsibility for those who were in college to maintain a relationship with their communities in order to assure their rights. For Jaime, like the rest of his peers, being an indigenous college student was not only a personal achievement, but an achievement that his community also gained from. He believed that as long as there was participation from the youth in their pueblo's or community affairs it would benefit the people who otherwise did not have a voice. In other words, it meant little what he or his colleagues learned in school if they could not apply their knowledge to resolve issues in their pueblo.

Of the few students that leave their pueblo to study in Oaxaca or Mexico City many desire to continue their involvement through their pueblo's civic affairs or in an indigenous organization. For example, several members of Red Nacional de Jóvenes Indígenas (RENJI), an indigenous student network throughout Mexico, have found common ground while in college by reclaiming their Indian identity and maintaining their involvement in their pueblo's cultural or political affairs. Described by multiple indigenous students in the Red:

Lo que identifica al joven indígena es sentir esa identidad por tu comunidad, ese compromiso que se va construyendo aún cuando estudias porque quieres hacer algo por tu comunidad— aprender algo nuevo para llevarlo de regreso a tu comunidad.¹²⁰

What identifies indigenous youth is the feeling of that identity towards your community, that obligation that is being constructed even when you study because you want to do something for your community— learn something new to take it back to your community.

¹²⁰ Navarrete, David Gómez, "Juventudes Indígenas en México: Temas y Dilemas Emergentes," *Aquí Estamos* 13 (2010): 52, accessed August 16, 2011.

As described earlier, attending college does not completely imply to part from the community. What it does imply is to distinguish the most viable ways to maintain their involvement, while also contributing to its cultural, linguistic, political and economic growth. All of these components expand their autonomy in describing their identity. Nonetheless, it is also important to keep in mind that many communities expect migrants (both internal and external) to continue their participation with the pueblo, if not economically, than at least civically.¹²¹ In these ways the pueblo may assure that migrants continue maintaining their relationship with the community. However, at the same time migrants become conscious of their ethnic identity or reinforce their identity outside of it. Preserving pueblo traditions in celebrations, dances, language, etc. gives the jóvenes greater reasons for claiming their Zapotecness. Yolanda, another Zapoteca member from RENJI further described the impact that going to college in the city has on her indigeneity:

La cuestión de la lengua se va dejando de lado, pero cuando estas con otros jóvenes indígenas es un elemento de identidad y orgullo. Por lo tanto juega varios roles [...] En las ciudades ser joven es algo más individual al no tener la responsabilidad familiar [...] Los jóvenes indígenas universitarios están trabajando y estudiando, y esa cooperación familiar es algo que sigue presente.¹²²

The subject of language is left aside, but when you're with other indigenous youth it's an element of identity and pride. Meanwhile it plays various roles [...] In the cities being a young [adult] is something more individual because you do not have the responsibility with family [...] University indigenous youth are working and studying, and the family cooperation is something that continues to be present.

¹²¹ If they live in pueblos that govern by usos y costumbres taking a *cargo* in the pueblo is more probable. Cargo refers to a municipal position taken in the pueblo's political system.

¹²² Navarrete, David Gómez, "Juventudes Indígenas," 52-53.

As a result of their close relationship with their village Zapoteco youth showed that they are more likely to claim their indigeneity than they were prior to college. While preserving their native language reinforced their Zapotecness it also reinforced primary government categorization of defining Indianness. For indigenous people and the state language, therefore, has always played an important component in describing indigenous groups.

In *Being Indian in Hueyapan*, Judith Friedlander describes Doña Zeferina, an older female villager from Hueyapan, Morelos discriminatory experience with a man in Mexico City. Friedlander describes how one day Doña Zeferina made a comment about her dislike for the man's dog, an *itzcuintli*, commonly known as an Aztec dog:

Having never seen an *itzcuintli* before, Doña Zeferina remarked that the dog was quite ugly. Surprised by her reaction, the man explained that she was looking at an Aztec dog, domesticated by her ancestors. She should be proud of it. To which she replied she was no Aztec. And, what is more, that his dog was still ugly.¹²³

These types of ethnic encounters have homogenized indigenous groups as being Aztec. Even though indigenismo has officially ended its methods of celebrating an Indian past through an Aztec heritage are still alive in many people. Zapoteco student's indigenous self-identification challenges these views by embracing their difference. In Oaxaca, a state with fifteen indigenous ethnic groups: Zapoteco, Mixteco, Mixe, Chinanteco, Chontal, Chatino, Trique, Nahuatl, Zoque, Huave, Cuicateco, Mazateco, Amuzgo, Ixcateco, and Chocholteco reclaiming their indigeneity as they wish goes a long way to in taking on their differences as indigenous groups.

¹²³ Judith Friedlander, *Being Indian in Hueyapan: A Revised and Updated Edition* (New York, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 180.

Vero, a 21 year-old Zapoteca woman from the Central Valleys of Oaxaca (her pueblo is less than an hour away from the city) also shared her idea of *being Indian*. She currently goes to college in the City of Oaxaca and like the rest of the people living in towns nearby a majority has lost the ability to speak their native language. When asked how she described her Zapotec identity as a young adult in college she replied,

El que no nada más trabaja adelante, si no el que trabaja en manera horizontal, el que lleva enfrente por sus diferentes capacidades y fortalezas actividades comunitarias, agrícolas, culturales—académicas.

He who not only works forward, but who works horizontally, who carries in front of him his capacities and strong community, agricultural, cultural—academic activities.

Vero's description brings both the experience of a rural and urban Indian. Her incorporation of community activities and agriculture, along with those of cultural and academic expression show the "old" and the "new" that make up an indigenous identity for jóvenes today. By bringing the rural and urban experience together it allows for the survival of the "contemporary Indian" that can carry together the old and the new to recreate their self-identity as urban Indians.

The proximity of Vero's pueblo to the city and her daily journey to college challenges the stereotypical Indian image of being rural Indians that speak their native language. She, like other Zapoteco students have been able to maintain their roots by bringing their own knowledge to what they learn at school. Since many of them are in liberal arts studies: History, Sociology, Rural Studies, Anthropology, or Political Science, they expressed that these fields allow them to further challenge discrimination and a denial of their history and rights. Prior to this type of schooling Vero, like other jóvenes described here, went to *escuelas rurales* or *indígenas*. These schools she said are poor

because they deny them of knowing “quienes somos y quien hemos sido” in the history of Mexico country.

Having spaces that allow for indigenous rights, Vero expressed is critical in the development of their own identities. She described that “más espacios de fortalecimientos de capacidades [son importantes] porque es la única forma en que nosotros volvemos a reindivarnos como indígenas pero también trabajar por los pueblos indígenas.” For many jóvenes the “Juventudes Indígenas de México” seminar allowed them to combine their culture, traditions, and education in describing their ethnicity to otherwise incomprehensible mainstream Mexico. Interestingly, however, many of the jóvenes in Oaxaca (compared to Zapotecos in California, see Chapter 4) are still incorporating much of the state’s discourse to describe their Indianness. This brings me to my next study in how most Zapoteco in Mexico were still primarily describing their Zapotecness.

“Indian Authenticity?”: Language, Clothing, Rural Pueblo (LCR)

This section describes how Oaxaqueños in Mexico often used specific state descriptions of indigenous identity to primarily describe their Indianness. Many Zapotecos in the seminar and in the APPO-Comerciantes— another group of youth I interviewed in Oaxaca City, continuously described their identity by the ability to speak their native language, wearing traditional clothing, and coming from a rural pueblo. While some may have unconsciously used these state defined characteristics to describe their indigeneity it shows the power that place and state have in influencing peoples’ idea of “being Indian.”¹²⁴ That is, the Mexican states’ clinging to the use of language,

¹²⁴ For Zapoteco students in the United States they were more likely to describe their indigeneity in terms of racial and ethnic differences (being dark skinned). See Chapter 4.

clothing, and having a rural origin are an ideological control over its population. These were all used as indicators to affirm their *Indian authenticity* even as some of these characteristics did not directly apply to all young Zapotecos (e.g.: some jóvenes no longer speak the language).¹²⁵ I will refer to these three descriptions as LCR (language, clothing, and rural pueblo).

LCR were seen as basic descriptions in which they could further draw their distinction from others. These were used not only by Zapotecos but other indigenous youth to express their identity. Of these language was constantly the main component in describing their ethnicity. Being able to speak their native language was a sign of self pride for those who still spoke it. It was as if they overcame what the state had so long tried to deny them —the use of Spanish over their native language. Other jóvenes described “la lengua materna” as, “lo más valioso que podemos tener.”¹²⁶ Holding on to this language was an enormous sign of pride because despite efforts to eradicate them since Spanish colonialism it had survived in their communities and in them. On the other side it shows the influence of the state to continue classifying indigenous people as those who speak an indigenous language.

In Oaxaca, like many other Mexican states, governments continue to borrow the use of language from the Mexican census as a primary indicator to solely define indigenous communities. These wrongly actions dispossess many people of their identity

¹²⁵ I borrow Paul Gilroy’s critical analyzes of authenticity from *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* and from “Sounds Authentic: Black Music, Ethnicity, and the Challenge of ‘Changing’ Same.” Gilroy argues that in popular culture, such as in “music” (his observation jazz and hip hop), Blacks and others often have notions that this music is authentic to Black culture. Gilroy also argues that it becomes used to describe their “racial authenticity” as Blacks. As mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, it is problematic to make an assumption that there is a racial or ethnic authenticity tied to culture because particular moments in history have displaced and transformed these.

¹²⁶ Expressed by a young Mixe male during a workshop.

because it breaks with their recognition and right to self-identify as indigenous. Unfortunately, this affects a number of people who no longer speak their native language because their “authenticity” becomes questioned. Zapotecos, like other Oaxaqueños lose in reclaiming their identity as they are simply homogenized as Mexicans. With the use of language the Mexican state officially reports not only a local, but a national decline of indigenous people since very few nowadays speak an indigenous language. Using such ideas only demonstrates the state’s hegemonic practices to define ethnicity and ignores the fact that identities are always changing.

Another description used to define their identity was traditional clothing. Traditional clothing was important in two ways: first because it helped each other recognize the communities they were coming from. Second, it gave them a “sense of being and belonging,” as well as right to question others authenticity for not wearing indigenous clothing.¹²⁷ The first day of the conference almost every single youth was dressed in the traditional clothes of his or her ethnicity or pueblo (see Appendix for pictures). This clothing consisted of *manta* (mostly a white rough cotton fabric) with colorful embroidery for both men and women. Women either wore *manta huipiles* (similar to a shirt), skirts, or dresses, *rebozos* (especial knitted scarves) with *huaraches* (leather sandals), and some even wore manually crafted jewelry with an indigenous symbol or representation of *maiz* (maize). For the most part men wore *manta* shirts with less embroidery, *huaraches*, and a *morral* (a heavily knitted handbag). Very few of them wore *calzones de manta* (*manta* pants). Although more than half of the jóvenes only wore

¹²⁷ As described by Gaspar Rivera-Salgado during a conversation I had with him in 2011.

an entire garment the first and last day of the seminar it was important in finding common ground with others who also expressed their identity in clothing.

Other students who never wore these clothes during the seminar were questioned for not doing so. A small group of students asked if those who did not wear it were embarrassed to be seen like that, of which Emilio (a Oaxaqueño) responded that he did not have to dress with “ropa tradicional” (traditional clothing) to express his indigeneity. He went onto say that his identity was not only carried in objects but in his “conciencia, corazón, y acciones” (conscious, heart, and actions) which for him were equally important. This shows that clothing goes along way not only in including some but excluding others.

In many occasions a group of participants from the APPO-Comerciantes (in Oaxaca City) described why they were not indigenous. Aside from language, clothing was a major factor they used in categorizing others as indigenous. They expressed that they were not Zapotecos nor either belonged to another indigenous group because they did not speak Zapoteco or “dressed indigenous.” However, their family emigrated from a pueblo that lived by usos y costumbres, practiced traditions and continued to speak their native language—Zapoteco. The fact that they did not wear the clothing or speak Zapoteco was a major reason they did not identify as indigenous.

To my surprise though college students in the APPO-Comerciantes often pointed to where various Triquis (another indigenous group) were sitting together selling their merchandise to tourists. One young man, Sergio, told me, “Si quieres hablar con indígenas ahí estan los Triquis (pointing to them), ellos si son indígenas.” At first I was puzzled as to why he said that, but immediately I noticed that the ten or more Triquis that

wore red colorful wool huipiles and were speaking the Triqui or Mixteco language was the reason he pointed me to them.¹²⁸ It was evident that physical characteristics were important in categorizing “Indians” from “non-Indians.” The importance of clothing went along way in defining their cultural and racial distinction. Automatically, if one wore traditional clothing and talked an indigenous language they categorized as Indian and looked down upon.

These forms of detaching oneself from being indigenous have plagued not only Oaxaqueños but also other indigenous and non-indigenous Mexicans in justifying their non-Indianness. In multiple interviews Judith Friedlander had with villagers in Hueyapan, Morelos she described the following:

The vast majority of the people I interviewed in Hueyapan defined their Indianness in terms of what they did not have, or could not do [...] More than anything else, being Indian, in their eyes, meant being poor and uneducated. Virtually, everyone gave the same answer. [However], villagers did not see their Indianness in terms of skin color or any other physical characteristic as a significant feature of their Indian identity.¹²⁹

Like the villagers in Hueyapan, APPO-Comerciantes gave the same explanation in describing why they were not indigenous. Skin color and other physical characteristics such as hair, eyes and height were pretty much invisible to them. The differentiation in culture, language and place of origin were constantly used by the Comerciantes as ethnic differentiations to explain why they were not Zapotecos. Furthermore, even though racism is very well present in Mexico, as it is in the United States, it was not a major characteristic of being indigenous as it was for the Zapotecos in California (Chapter 4),

¹²⁸ Other characteristics in describing their ethnicity were culture, language, living in pueblo’s governed by “usos y costumbres,” and coming from a small pueblo.

¹²⁹ Judith Friedlander, *Being Indian in Hueyapan*, 70 & 73.

showing that sociohistorical factors in both countries are highly influential in describing their Zapotecness.

Lastly, another distinction of indigenous authenticity was the fact of being raised in a rural pueblo. Although, not as common as the use of language or clothing it provided youth in the seminar with a sense of belonging to a pre-Colombian pueblo. For many the fact that their town existed prior to Spanish colonialism was another reason in explaining their Zapotecness. Identifying with their pueblo as, “soy de la comunidad de Tlacolula de Matamoros,” “Sierra Juárez,” or “el Istmo” shows their relation to their land and a way to reclaim their identity.

Contrary from the youth at the conference, Comerciante youth made their non-Zapotec distinction in describing their urban life experience. Even though some were born in a pueblo they felt no connection to it because they were not raised there. For example, German, twenty years old, expressed his reasons why he was not Zapoteco:

Yo e vivido en la ciudad [Oaxaca City] toda mi vida. Desde que estaba chico mis papas salieron de Juchitán [in the Isthmus] para trabajar aquí en la ciudad de Oaxaca. Mis padres hablan Zapoteco, yo lo entiendo, pero no puedo hablarlo.

I have lived in the city all my life. Since I was little my parents emigrated from Juchitán to work here in the City of Oaxaca. My parents speak Zapoteco, I understand it, but do not speak it.

The fact that German grew up most of his life in Oaxaca City, even though officially Juchitán has been a city since the 19th century, its large Zapotec cultural and linguistic presence was reason enough for German to deny being from Juchitán, thereby denying his indigenusness. In German’s view existed a stereotypical image of “being Indian.” Because he no longer spoke Zapoteco and grew up in Oaxaca City automatically meant

In addition, other Zapotecos living in cities like Juchitán, Tehuantepec, Teotitlán del Valle, etc. stated that the development of their town was advancing and no longer “un pueblo indígena.”¹³⁰

German, Sergio and other APPO-Comerciantes detach themselves from belonging to a pueblo because to them the rural Indian is seen as something shameful, while the urban Indian is non-existing. The social stigma attached to them was enough to deny having such characteristics they felt described indigenous people. The years of government effort to portray an Indian image as “rural” had been internalized by many in Oaxaca.¹³¹ Because the government has used this classification to account for indigenous peoples it not only demonstrates the power of the state to define ethnicity, but exemplifies how historically the state controls the growth of an unwanted population.¹³² Even when indigenous rights legislation recognizes multiculturalism in Oaxaca, as well as the right to self-identity as indigenous, hegemonic practices continue.

Despite the differences from the APPO-Comerciantes and the Zapoteco college students in the seminar defining what it means to be indigenous as those who speak an indigenous language, wear traditional clothing, and live or are raised in a rural pueblo were powerful descriptions in determining their identity. Nonetheless, bringing their ethnic identity to the forefront with what they are learning in college is a significant in the way Mexico has restructured some schools (described later in this chapter). These urban

¹³⁰ A conversation with the host family I stayed with in the Central Valley

¹³¹ Although I did not quote all mestizo and college students from the APPO or other Oaxaqueños, most expressed these characteristics (or their lack thereof) as legitimate reasons why they felt they were not Zapotecos.

¹³² As one of the states with the most poverty Oaxaca is also one of the states that receives the most welfare programs to alleviate its poverty. Since indigenous peoples are among the poorest, and the use of an indigenous language is lower than people that claim an indigenous identity the distribution is incredibly low.

Indians, like rural Indians, are politicized in the process not only of demanding their rights as Indians, but of claiming their indigeneity despite government efforts to eradicate them. For students in the “Juventudes Indígenas de México” seminar the reclaiming of their Zapotecness challenges discrimination and prejudicial feelings against them.

College Education Structure

Prior to college “low enrollment rates and high dropout rates beyond the primary level are just some of the problems that plague the school system in Mexico, particularly in rural areas (Santibañez, Vernez, and Razquin 2005).”¹³³ According to Davis et al., “Mexico today spends about 4.4 percent of its GDP on education, similar to the 4.6 percent average of other nations in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD Family Database 2010).”¹³⁴ Despite being a significant percent spent when compared to other countries, Mexican educational attainment in finishing what we consider in the United States to be basic schooling is not considerable. It is important to keep in mind that for indigenous populations the educational average is four years, whereas the national average is eight.¹³⁵ For this reason comparing Oaxaca’s average educational percentage to that of the national level is important to discuss in this section.

At the national level, college attainment and indigenous youth presence in them has steadily increased. Although the rates are not considerably high, the changes that some colleges have recently made challenge prior stereotype notions of being Indian. As

¹³³ Coreen Davis, et al. “A House Divided: Family Separation and Education,” in *The Wall Between Us: An Indigenous Community in Mexico and the United States*, ed. David Fitzgerald et al. (Connecticut: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2012), forthcoming book. However, middle school enrollment and attainment increased after 1993, which may be due to a change in national education during that year.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

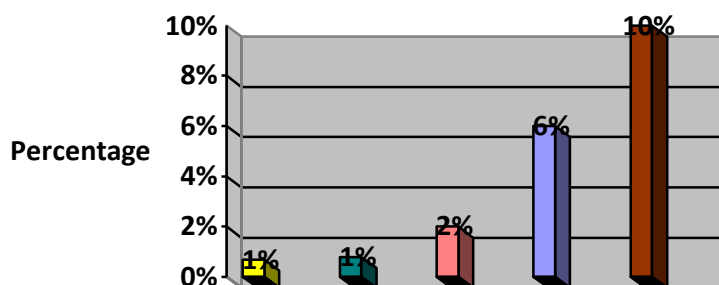
¹³⁵ INEGI 2010.

a result, this has encouraged some youth who previously did not see themselves as indigenous (because they felt embarrassed to do so) to take on their identity as such. The steps that newer universities have taken are not only through naming of some universities or curricula, but also through activities they do in order to address various situations that affect indigenous peoples throughout Mexico.

Before I briefly describe some of the changes in the Mexican university system, it is necessary to quickly analyze the educational attainment of Oaxaqueños since 1970.¹³⁶ The following data, shown in percentages, was collected by the Mexican census and the Ministry of Public Education. It shows the grade level reached for every 100 people, ages fifteen and older, including indigenous and non-indigenous people in Oaxaca. It also reflects the information based on decades, starting from 1970 to 2010.

¹³⁶ No statistical data could be found prior to 1970. However, the start of the seventies was during the time the Instituto Nacional Indigenista (INI) took major steps in reforming its policies towards indigenous people and communities in educational reform (see Chapter 2). The data shown is not specific to indigenous people in Oaxaca. Rather, I use it to compare the overall educational attainment in Oaxaca (a state with an overwhelming indigenous population) to the rest of Mexico.

Oaxacan College Educational Attainment: 1970-2010



Graph 1: Oaxacan College Educational Attainment: 1970-2000

Source: Secretaría de Educación Pública 1970, 1980, 1990, and INEGI, Censos de Población y Vivienda 2000, 2010 (Oaxaca).

†Population 15 years and older.

In graph 1 it shows that from 1970 to 2010 university attainment in Oaxaca increased only nine percent. This percentage shows that although college attainment in the state has increased since the 1980s the growth is still extremely low. In 1970 and 1980 the level of education stayed the same at one percent, and only increased by one percent in 1990.¹³⁷ However, in the year 2000 the jump was staggering at six percent which was twice as much as it was the previous decade. That year, 2000, proved a major change from previous universities throughout Mexico. The following decade it reached ten percent- a four percent increase from 2000. The likelihood of getting a college education today continues to increase not only in Oaxaca but for the rest of the Mexican people. By 2030 the Subsecretaría de Educación Superior-SES (or sub-secretary of higher

¹³⁷ Rounded to the nearest decimal.

education) predicts that going to college will increase up to three times of what it is today for the State of Oaxaca.¹³⁸

Since the turn of the century one of them most significant changes have been public universities that aim towards the cultural studies of indigenous communities. Nine universities are currently registered under the name of Universidades Interculturales (UI).¹³⁹ They formed in 2003 and specialize in cultural and liberal arts studies, particularly of indigenous peoples. These studies are focused at teaching about cultures, languages, community development, and past and present history of indigenous peoples throughout Mexico.¹⁴⁰ According to the SES, the mission of the UI system is to professionally prepare students in the economic, social, and cultural development of indigenous peoples.¹⁴¹ Its principal mission is to work for the development of Indian language and culture.

Sylvia Schmelkes found that a UI particularly influenced youth's prior perception of their ethnicity. At the Universidad Intercultural del Estado de México 280 newly

¹³⁸ Rodolfo Tuirán and José Luis Ávila, "La educación superior: escenarios y desafíos futuros," *Este País* vol. unavailable (date unknown): 2-4, accessed September 26, 2011.

¹³⁹ The nine schools are the Universidad Intercultural de Chiapas, Universidad Intercultural Indígena de Michoacán, Universidad Intercultural del Estado de Tabasco, Universidad Intercultural del Estado de México, Universidad Intercultural del Estado de Puebla, Universidad Veracruzana Intercultural, Universidad Intercultural Maya de Quintana Roo, Universidad Intercultural del Estado de Guerrero, and Universidad Autónoma Indígena de México. These schools are supported by the Coordinación General de Educación Intercultural y Bilingüe (a branch of the Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas, CDI) which was created in 2001. The last school to be incorporated in the Universidades Interculturales system was the Universidad Autónoma Indígena de México; this school is located in the state of Sinaloa). For more information on Universidades Interculturales throughout Mexico visit, http://www.redui.org.mx/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=19&Itemid=27. Also visit the government website http://ses4.sep.gob.mx/wb/ses/la_educacion_superior_escenarios_y_desafios_futuro

¹⁴⁰ For more information regarding the coursework and programs offered visit, <http://www.redui.org.mx/> and http://ses4.sep.gob.mx/wb/ses/la_educacion_superior_escenarios_y_desafios_futuro.

¹⁴¹ Tuirán and Luis Ávila, "La educación superior." The sub-secretary of higher education also states that the universities hope to achieve scientific knowledge, along with native knowledge.

admitted students were asked whether they spoke an indigenous language.¹⁴² Of these, forty students responded they did speak an indigenous language.¹⁴³ Surprisingly, after the first semester they were asked again and eighty affirmed that they spoke a native language.¹⁴⁴ University officials saw this as an achievement of their dedication to promoting indigenous culture and pride. The attempt of the Universidad Intercultural del Estado de México and other UIs, is for students to have a more inclusive education system that primarily incorporates indigenous studies. Because the retaking of an indigenous identity occurred after their first semester it appeared that the institutions were indeed beneficial to the growth of indigenous peoples.

Furthermore, Schmelkes describes that there have been documented methods of discrimination employed by some schools prior to college. For example, a high school in Chiapas had signs in the hallway saying, “Prohibido Hablar el Dialecto.”¹⁴⁵ Thus, for students who are denied from speaking “dialecto” a feeling of embarrassment and their right to self-identity was deprived. Discriminatory experiences like the one just mentioned shows how the basic education system in Mexico can be a negative impact to indigenous student’s indigeneity. Universidades Interculturales appear to encourage and recognize their identity without student, staff or faculty ridicule. Important to remember, however, is that this was only the case of one UI, and while it may be aimed at indigenous cultural studies it may first need to restructure its admission process to make it more accessible to these students.

¹⁴² Sylvia Schmelkes, “Las universidades interculturales en México: ¿Una contribución a la equidad en educación superior?” *Educación Intercultural* 20:1 (2009): 9.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ Schmelkes, “Las universidades interculturales en México,” 14.

Contrary to what the Mexican education system has intended to promote, the Universidades Interculturales's mission and vision has many drawbacks. First, even though the schools are open to indigenous and non-indigenous students it is mostly attended by mestizo Mexicans.¹⁴⁶ Second, these schools are mostly in states with a small indigenous population that tend to have a higher educational attainment than Oaxaca. This is different to what the Red de Universidades Interculturales (Redui) and the United Nations's report.¹⁴⁷ As a matter of fact the United Nations (UN) reports that there are approximately 4,500 Indian youth attending the UIs, which the UN interprets as a majority of Indian attendees in these schools. However, mostly mestizo Mexican youth have benefited from intercultural college education.

Schmelkes research estimates that in 2008 there were approximately one to three percent of indigenous youth registered in the universities.¹⁴⁸ Aside from dominant ethnic groups benefiting from the UIs is the fact that these schools are rather new in Oaxaca since the latter half of 2000. Universidad Indígena Intercultural Ayuuk in the Mixe region and the Escuela Normal Bilingüe e Intercultural de Oaxaca in the Central Valley are some of intercultural colleges in Oaxaca. However, these are not part of the UI system. The education provided is very limited, only being able to provide a bachelor's degree in sustainable agriculture, farming, and extremely limited in cultural studies. Like the UIs the enrollment of indigenous students is also extremely low.

¹⁴⁶ Schmelkes, "Las universidades interculturales en México," 6.

¹⁴⁷ See, <http://www.redui.org.mx/> and Grace Guerrero, "Universidades Interculturales atiendan a cerca de 4,500 estudiantes de pueblos indígenas" in the *Organización de Naciones Unidas para la Educación, la Ciencia y la Cultura* and the Instituto Internacional para la Educación Superior en America Latina y el Caribe (September 12, 2008): 1, accessed September 26, 2011.

¹⁴⁸ Schmelkes, "Las universidades interculturales en México," 6.

Today the state of Oaxaca remains as one of the lowest in college education achievement, as it has in the previous years when compared to most Mexican states.¹⁴⁹ The disproportionate enrollment of indigenous youth in universities will continue to afflict youth and researchers interested in addressing indigenous education. This situation will continue until congress and the Secretaría de Educación Pública-SEP (Ministry of Education) critically redirects and restructures basic education, and university institutions. The reforms can take place through the availability of newer adequate books, better prepared instructors, and curricula that is more inclusive of indigenous cultures, history, and issues. If these actions take place it would increase the reclaiming of an indigenous identity among students who would otherwise be too embarrassed to identify as such.

Conclusion

Even though college students in the APPO-Comerciantes used their lack of speaking Zapoteco, wearing traditional clothing, and not living in a rural pueblo as reasons for their non Indianness, Zapotecos in the seminar used these three markers and other descriptions in stating why they are indigenous. Seminars such as the “Juventudes Indígenas de México” demonstrate how some Zapoteco college students are reclaiming their indigeneity in ways that go against the Mexican state’s preconceived notion of being Indian. Maintaining their involvement in indigenous organizations or directly with their pueblo has been positively influential in reclaiming their Zapotecness. Consequently, they have applied their experiences as Zapotecos to what they are learning in college and applying their college education to continue reclaiming their right as indigenous people.

¹⁴⁹ Instituto Nacional Estadísticas y Geografía 2010.

Learning about their history, culture and rights as indigenous college students in liberal arts studies further encourages them to reclaim their identity. Thus, having a college education in which they read literature on their history and contemporary indigenous issues are key factors that alter prior negative notions of being indigenous. Their education and participation are not only helping them to reconstruct their indigeneity, but is challenging discrimination and stereotypes historically practiced in the education system vis-à-vis Mexican state hegemony.

The consequences of such unassimilated integration will continue having a long positive effect for self-Zapoteco identity. Politically, and culturally they are making a difference for indigenous youth because they go beyond state definitive paradigms to describe their indigeneity. The following chapter shows how the reclaiming of an indigenous identity for Zapoteco college students in Los Angeles, California is different and at times similar to those of Zapotecos in Oaxaca, Mexico.

Chapter 4:

Growing-up *Oaxican* in Los Angeles*

The Oaxacan migrant experience in California has been one of multiple encounters and life experiences. Discrimination based on language, culture, and physical appearance continues to be prevalent for indigenous immigrants and their descendants in the United States. Michael Kearney stated that Zapotec migrants “elaborate cultural expressions of themselves as indigenous peoples that are distinct from the standard definitions and expressions of indigenous identity in Mexico.”¹⁵⁰ His argument still holds true today but now among second-generation Zapotecos. Different from the Zapoteco adult-youth in Oaxaca, Los Angeles-based Zapotecos are appropriating an indigenous transnational identity that is not primarily based on language, clothing and being raised in a rural pueblo.

In this chapter I argue three things: inter-ethnic discrimination for Oaxaqueño children during their childhood education creates feelings of shame for being indigenous. Second, college (especially in the Liberal Arts) becomes a space of empowerment in reclaiming these youth’s Zapotecness. Third, like their Oaxacan-based counterparts their prior civic participation with their pueblo and their political involvement as college students further influences them in their Oaxaqueño identity. In addition, this chapter reinforces that they too are indigenous Oaxaqueño/as even though many were not born in Oaxaca, speak Zapoteco, or dress traditionally.

* I appreciate Gaspar Rivera-Salgado for his suggestion on “Oaxican” as a description that Zapoteco youth in Los Angeles are using to describe themselves. This term is a result of their urban life experience in the United States that blends English and Spanish together, also known as Spanglish.

¹⁵⁰ Kearney, “Transnational Oaxacan Indigenous Identity,” 174-175.

In grade school, Zapotecos in Los Angeles are discriminated against for being different from other Latino and even other Mexican children.¹⁵¹ For many, their dark-skin, short height and even just their self-identification as Oaxaqueños has caused a battery of discrimination and triggered feelings of inferiority at a young age. However, many of these children have grown up to attend four year universities and some are even going to graduate school. Surprisingly, they too are participating in their pueblo's hometown associations (HTAs)—immigrant associations based on shared hometown that bring members together for cultural, political, social, and even religious purposes (some times informal)—or other cultural activities; others are in a political organization, like the Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales (FIOB) in Los Angeles.¹⁵² These are spaces which allow them to create and re-create their pan-Zapotec or Oaxacan identity as they integrate the culture they have grown up with in the U.S. with what they have maintained of their Oaxaqueño culture. Particularly, their education in liberal arts studies and their political and early civic (as well as cultural) involvement has made them conscious, and proud of being Zapotec.

The biggest migration of Oaxaqueños to California was in the 1980's.¹⁵³ Zapotec peoples' primary destination was metropolitan Los Angeles, in areas like Pico-Union, Mid-City and South Central, my focus in this chapter. Like other migrants they have formed ethnic enclaves as a way to adapt to their new place. At the same time it has

¹⁵¹ I use "grade school" to refer to an elementary to high school education.

¹⁵² For more on Oaxacan hometown associations see, Rivera-Salgado 1999 and Gaspar Rivera-Salgado, "Equal in Dignity and Rights: The Struggle of Indigenous Peoples of the Americas in an Age of Migration" (Inaugural address presented as Professor to the Prince Claus Chair in Development and Equality at the Utrecht University, Utrecht, Netherlands, 2005), 20-21.

¹⁵³ Jonathan Fox and Gaspar Rivera-Salgado, "Building Civil Society among Indigenous Migrants," in *Indigenous Mexican Migrants in the United States*, ed. Jonathan Fox and Gaspar Rivera-Salgado (La Jolla, California: Regents of the University of California and by the Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies and the Center for Comparative Immigration Studies at the University of California, San Diego, 2004), 2.

allowed them to maintain their traditions and cultures from their pueblos which have transferred on to their U.S. raised children.¹⁵⁴ The close relationship with the pueblo has eventually encouraged some youth to identify as Oaxican. In doing so they are expressing their indigenous background. This is an ongoing process in response to years of being discriminated against. Nevertheless, their identity has been supported and maintained in their Oaxacalifornia enclave because of their parent's continuous interest in hometown affairs, and now ultimately in their interest.¹⁵⁵ I use the term Oaxaqueño, Oaxican, and Zapoteco interchangeably as a way of expressing indigeneity since my respondents for this chapter understand all three to mean indigenous. The expression as "Oaxican" also plays an important role that is part of their ethnic identity construction in the U.S., as it uses a mixture of English and Spanish to describe their indigeneity.

Analyzing transnational activities is important to analyzing 'Oaxican' youth identity. Transnationalism is a hot topic and a recurrent phenomenon studied at various levels for those interested in immigrant cross-border ties. It is important to study how transnational activities not only inhibit indigenous peoples' identity but also how they help U.S. raised young adults of immigrant parents preserve this identity. Transnational events or activities, however, cannot be individually looked at because it would miss a lot and thereby fail to take into account the macro-level causes and effects of its particular occurrence.

In "Transnationalism in Question," Roger Waldinger and David Fitzgerald argue that transnational activities of "international migrants and their descendants" occur given

¹⁵⁴ For further discussion on the mechanisms of migrant ethnic enclaves see, Suárez-Orozco and Páez 2002; Portes and Rumbaut 2006 or for Oaxacan enclaves formed in California see Melero-Malpica eds. Ochoa and Ochoa 2005; Stephen 2007; and Weber ed. Grant-Wood 2004.

¹⁵⁵ Michael Kearney and Carole Negengast coined the term Oaxacalifornia in 1989.

the state and state-politics of “here” and “there.”¹⁵⁶ That is, activities of immigrants and their children across nation-states are dependent on current politics and policies of both their place of origin and their place of settlement—their political or civic actions are not spontaneous. As long as oppressive laws or actions against immigrant or racial groups exist organized oppositions will react towards these as a means of survival not only politically, but culturally and socially with their fellow hometown migrants. It is in this framework that I construct how transnational activities and politics, along with a liberal arts college education influence second-generation Zapotecos in California to see themselves as indigenous.

Michael Kearney’s description on Oaxacan transnational experiences as it relates to ethnicity is described as an influence of:

Political, social, and cultural practices whereby citizens [and non- direct citizens] of the nation-state—in this case Mexican nationals who are also indigenous peoples—construct social forms and identities that in part escape from the cultural and political hegemony of their nation-state. These new transnational organizational forms and identities thus challenge the political forms and identities that are part and parcel of the hegemonic definitions that have been constructed by the modern Mexican state since its emergence in 1917.¹⁵⁷

In this way I argue in this chapter that second-generation Oaxacan youth are reclaiming and recreating their Zapotecness. Consciously or unconsciously they are denying the negative association of being indigenous that developed in 20th century Mexico by maintaining their cultural, social, and political ties as Oaxaqueños.

The complex transnational politics surrounding indigenous Oaxican college youth were evident during the seminar in Chiapas—“Juventudes Indígenas de México.”

¹⁵⁶ Roger Waldinger and David Fitzgerald, “Transnationalism in Question,” *American Journal of Sociology* vol. 109 no.5 (2004): 1178-1179 accessed May 2, 2011.

¹⁵⁷ Kearney, “Transnational Oaxacan Indigenous Identity,” 174-175.

Comments, such as, “Hay muchos gringos aquí,” were expressed by one indigenous Mexican-based joven in reference to three Oaxacan youth from California that were present. It was disturbing at various levels for the Californian youth because it made them feel excluded, as if living in the United States made them no longer Zapotecos. Furthermore, such comments express stereotypical notions of being Indian, such as living in a rural pueblo, or the ability to speak your native language.¹⁵⁸ Two of the California based Oaxaqueños were U.S.-born and the other immigrated as a new-born to California. Although in the beginning there were uneasy feelings to include Oaxaqueños from California, their account of discrimination in the United States made Mexican-based students aware that despite their diaspora these Oaxacalifornians’ also experience discrimination. In addition, many jóvenes in Mexico expressed that the sustainment of traditions, culture, identity (including territorial identity to their pueblo [like Zochinenses, Tlacolulenses,], clothing, etc. were reasons for the Californian students’ “authentic” indigeneity¹⁵⁹

This “imagined community,” as a collective space for immigrants of the same origin is further retained and distinctively influenced by these Oaxaqueños in college. Anderson describes that the *Imagined Communities*, as a nation, are communities where its members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them.¹⁶⁰ But yet in the minds of each lives the image of their

¹⁵⁸ For reasons that my interviewees in Los Angeles did not share at all, the effect of living in an urban is not stressed in this chapter as it was in chapter three, but nonetheless it is invisibly reflected throughout. No one mentioned living in urban or rural area as a reason for their Zapotec identity.

¹⁵⁹ However, none of the Oaxaqueño students from California spoke an indigenous language.

¹⁶⁰ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (New York, NY: Verso, 2006): 6.

relationship.¹⁶¹ Throughout Zapotec students' years of study and their political or civic involvement they become knowledgeable about their shared history and struggle against colonialism since Columbus's first arrival in North America. This experience gets them to critically engage in the discourse of the social construction of race and ethnicity to reject stereotypical ideas of indigenous groups, described below. Furthermore, these youth are using their indigenous rights to retain and defend their Oaxaqueño identity when denied not only by the Mexican state, but also the U.S. who believe that being born in the United States assimilates them as "American." These beliefs often mistakenly associate that being raised in the U.S. completely loses immigrant descendants' cultural, political, and social relationship to their community in Oaxaca. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, their college education of Los Angeles Zapotecos does not stand alone, since prior to college many were part of the Oaxacan transnational experience through their parents' engagement—a fact that makes Oaxaca the "ombligo" for second generation Zapotecos and Zapotecas.¹⁶²

Most jóvenes expressed that their Indian identity came earlier in their childhood because they were discriminated against by other Mexican children for being Oaxaqueños (mostly because of their dark skin and physical appearance). This inter-ethnic discrimination made them aware of their difference from other Mexican children. In bringing out this discrimination, my purpose is not to portray Oaxacans as passive

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Zapotecs are the primary Oaxacan group that has settled in the City of Los Angeles since the latter half of the 20th century. For more on Zapotec migration and settlement in Los Angeles see, Kearney 2000, 179; Stephen 2007, 106; Fox & Rivera-Salgado 2004, 152; Davis 2001, 20. "Ombligo" literally means belly button. In the context it is expressed as, "ahí se quedo mi ombligo," or "that is where my belly button was left" which I use to refer to Californian-based Oaxacan (college youth) holding a strong connection to their community in Oaxaca.

resisters, nor is it to homogenize other Mexican groups as prejudicial, but simply to share what most of the youth I interviewed as they expressed their ethnic identity.

This second-generation's prior cultural and civic participation reinforces the reclaiming of their Zapotecness. For example, of my twenty interviews nearly all had at one point been part of or attended the banda, dances, festivals (kermeses- party fundraisers for the pueblo's necessities), constantly returned to their pueblo's patron saint fiesta, or attended meetings of their hometown association. These activities helped them in building their tie to Oaxaca. However, their indigenous identity would not have occurred if it were not for the learning on specific issues in Latin American and U.S. history, contemporary issues and their cultural studies of minority groups. In learning about these second-generation Zapotecos are proudly claiming their identity.

Racial and Ethnic Discrimination in Early Education

While it is true that race and racism are issues in Oaxaca, the type of liberal arts education that Oaxacans are obtaining further influences how they see themselves in racial and ethnic terms. For California-based Zapotecos, race relations in the United States play an important role in how they see themselves differently from other mostly Mexican or Latino students. For example, four Zapotecos I interviewed, Octavio, Leslie, Eduardo, and Alma commented that as part of a Latino organization on their campus they often were described by other students as Latinos, Mexican-American, Chicanos or even "Aztec people." Leslie expressed her discontent to me by saying, "Aztec? I'm not Aztec nor Chicana. What about other indigenous groups? We exist you know!" Eduardo and Octavio who were born in Oaxaca expressed that other peers in MEChA (Movimiento

Estudiantil Chicano/a de Aztlan) or other Latinos groups referred to everyone in the group as Chicanos or Latinos. Octavio expressed,

I joined because it was the only place on campus where I could find other Mexican or Latino colleagues but when I told them I was Oaxaqueño some jokingly questioned me for not “dressing Oaxacan” while others asked me if I spoke an indigenous language. I grew up here [Los Angeles].

This discrimination of not being “authentic” enough was a great conflict between my interviewees and Mexican (mestizo and Chicano) classmates. Eduardo, who is so upset on this issue, wrote about it in the *Tequio Magazine*— the FIOB’s magazine that comes out every four months—he says: “Han habido casos en donde los Chicanos han cuestionado a los indígenas migrantes por no ‘vestirse como indígenas.’ Ante esa crítica, los migrantes indígenas respondemos: ‘no necesitamos vernos como indígenas para ser indígenas.’”¹⁶³ These experiences bring with them racial contestations but at the same time create a space where indigenous Mexican youth can address these issues. Work such as that of Mike Davis reminds us that “... indigenous immigrants like Zapotecs, Yaquis, Kanjobals and Mixtecs struggle to defend their distinctive identities within a hegemonically Mexican/Chicano popular culture.”¹⁶⁴ These “new” ethnicities continue to struggle a stratified racial and cultural hierarchy in the United States.

Still another student born in L.A. demonstrated her discomfort when the leaders in her school organization used statements like, “We are all Aztecs” or “We come from Aztlan.” Alma expressed, “I believe that for them it’s like a mythical past they want to be connected to, which is fine, but it’s also important for them to be aware that other Mexican cultures exist.” Leslie and Octavio, who were at UC Riverside and Cal State

¹⁶³ Luis Sánchez-López, “Oaxacalifornia in Califaztlan: descolonizando la idea de lo indígena,” *El Tequio*, 2010, 7.

¹⁶⁴ Mike Davis, *Magical Urbanism* (London: Verso, 2001), 20.

Northridge, respectively, continued to be in MEChA until they graduated because it was the most Latino political group on campus they could relate to. Eduardo and Alma left MEChA before graduating from UCLA and UC Santa Barbara. As graduate students Eduardo is now involved with an outside Oaxacan organization (described below) while Alma attends cultural Oaxacan events and political workshops in her community. While all agreed overall that campus organizations like MEChA were important in their politicization process they felt that the organization often popularized a stereotypical indigenous image as Aztec.

The inter-ethnic discrimination that exists among Mexicans in the United States is nothing new for indigenous Mexican migrants.¹⁶⁵ Lynn Stephen refers to this type of discrimination in California and Oregon as the “racial/ethnic hierarchy of Mexico.”¹⁶⁶ In Stephen’s book *Transborder Lives: Indigenous Oaxacans in Mexico, California, and Oregon* Oaxaqueños in the United States recalled being discriminated against mainly by people from Michoacán and Guanajuato. For Dolores Alvarez, a Mixteca woman Stephen interviewed, Michoacanos and Guanajuatenses racially and physically discriminate against and stereotype Oaxaqueños by pointing out that they have “obvious Oaxacan” physical features.¹⁶⁷ Dolores also points out how this type of racial discrimination now follows her child in school: “You hear these kinds of comments in the schools as well...They start having problems, and then it gets spread to the students in the school.”¹⁶⁸ However, as I have described earlier its impact on the student depends on the

¹⁶⁵ Fox and Rivera-Salgado, “Building Civil Society,” 12.

¹⁶⁶ Lynn Stephen, *Transborder Lives: Indigenous Oaxacans in Mexico, California, and Oregon* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2007), 211.

¹⁶⁷ Stephen, *Transborder Lives*, 214.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

parents and child's level of cultural, civic, and political interest in Oaxaca-based affairs. Further examples from my interviews also demonstrate that the more distant they are from these types of community participation, the more likely they are to internalize a shame or denial of being Zapotec or Oaxaqueña/o.

My research finds that a distinction between how college students in liberal arts studies and those who do not end up going to college identify themselves: college youth are more likely to identify as Oaxaqueño/a or Zapoteco/a, while those who did not end up going to college are more likely to territorially identify themselves. This does not mean that all Oaxaqueños who do not go to college ever develop an indigenous identity, but for these Zapotec youth who are the first in their family and pueblo to go to college, higher education plays a critical role in their political consciousness as indigenous.

My interviews and conversations with young, old, migrant or non-migrants, college educated or not- told me that they feel more discrimination from the *norteños* (referring to Mexicans north of Oaxaca). For example, the first people they mentioned as perpetrators of racist remarks towards them were people from Michoacán and Jalisco.¹⁶⁹

Raul, a Zapotec graduate student in Education said:

Unfortunately many of the people who discriminate against us for being Oaxacan are our own people—Mexicans. I remember being at a Oaxacan event at the Placita Olvera. Some guys standing behind me wearing their sombreros and *botas vaqueras* said to one another... 'Ay estos Oaxacos con su música. Aquí puro Jaliscience.'¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁹ However, we cannot assume that all Michoacáños, Jalisciences, Zacatecanos or people from Guanajuato hold prejudicial feelings or discriminatory actions, but acknowledge that these discriminatory ideas and actions have been perpetrated and supported by the state over the years. Unfortunately, they have influenced some Mexican civilians and use it against indigenous Mexicans outside of Mexico. Mainly, this discrimination has continued in the U.S. because of the country's same racial and cultural hierarchy that exists.

¹⁷⁰ The last sentence reads: "Oh these 'Oaxacos' (derogatory term towards Oaxaqueños) with their music. Here only Jalisciences (people from Jalisco).

Another racial encounter happened to Doña Flor, a sixty-year old migrant woman from the Sierra Juárez. She was shopping at a local Latin American market in Pico-Union:

Nicolás: Expliqueme como fue discriminada.

Doña Flor: Pues yo estaba en la marqueta con una de mis tias. Estabamos hablando el Zapoteco y uno de los trabajadores se nos acercó y nos pregunta que que idioma hablabamos. Yo le dije, Zapoteco y el respondió, “ah, es de México?” y le dije que si, que somos de Oaxaca y el dijo, “O yo soy de Michoacán y pues puro español ahí. Por un momento pense que hablaban Chino.” A la mejor no fue su intención ofendernos pero pues no me gusto.

Nicolás: Explain how you were discriminated.

Doña Flor: Well I was in the grocery store with an aunt of mine. We were speaking Zapoteco and a worker came to us and asked what language we were talking. I said Zapoteco and he responded, “Oh, you’re from Mexico?” and I said yes, that we’re from Oaxaca and he said, “Oh I’m from Michoacán and well we only speak Spanish there. I thought you were speaking Chinese.” Probably it was not his intention to offend us but I didn’t like his comment.

What is interesting about the frequent naming of Michoacán, Jalisco, at times Zacatecas and Guanajuato is that they all have an indigenous population. Although historically not as big as Oaxaca’s their presence is still felt. Whereas Oaxaqueños increasingly migrated in the 80s Michoacanos, Zacatecanos and Jaliscienses were early Mexican migrants to the U.S. Since then they have developed strong transnational organizations and federations that closely tie them to their community in Mexico.¹⁷¹

Racial and cultural discrimination has made some people stronger in describing their identity due to the closely knitted relationship Oaxaqueño migrants have expressed in their culture, language, and other traditions. In my research Estrella, a twenty-seven-

¹⁷¹ For more on Michoacán migration and transnational activism in California see, FitzGerald 2000. For more on Jalisco, Michoacán and Guanajuato as traditional migrant communities see, David S. FitzGerald, *A Nation of emigrants: how Mexico manages its migration* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2009), 6 & 51; Rivera-Salgado and Escala Rabadán 2004. Zacatecas has the highest international emigration (FitzGerald 2009, 64).

year-old graduate student born in Los Angeles to migrant parents from the Sierra Juárez shared her and her parents' experience in the U.S. In the 1970's her parents met in Los Angeles through established networks with already settled family and friends in what is now among the heartlands of Oaxacalifornians— Koreatown and Pico-Union area. Estrella's parents had participated in cultural activities since the late seventies through their pueblo's *asamblea* or *union de paisanos*. Her dad, a sibling, and various other family members had been in one of the first Oaxacan bands to form in L.A., *Banda de San Jerónimo Zochina*. One of her siblings and Estrella herself were encouraged by her parents to participate in Oaxacan *bailables* (dances) as children. After a few months they performed these *bailables* back in their pueblo for the patron saint fiesta—San Jerónimo. As teenagers they continued dancing for the *Guelaguetza* festival in Los Angeles.¹⁷² Estrella's experience growing up as a Oaxaqueña shows an interesting outcome to her identity:

I got made fun of and bullied for looking the way I still do—dark and very Indian. It was constantly this kid from Michoacán.¹⁷³ He called me, “Pinche India; sucia; India Maria [T.V. character that plays the role of an immigrant indigenous woman in the City of Mexico]” It was bad, but it wasn't until he said to me, “India bajada del cerro,” and even though at the time I had no idea what that meant it hurt me. I got home and I asked my mom what it meant. Her advice was, “Dile que con mucho orgullo. De Oaxaca a venido uno de los mejores presidentes [referring to Benito Juárez] que México ha tenido.” With that said, he never said anything to me again.

Estrella did not express a feeling of growing-up with self-hate, as is often the case of such constant forms of prejudicial experiences. The level of her parents, pueblo's and

¹⁷² *Guelaguetza* is a Zapotec word that refers to reciprocity or mutual aid, but its meaning now refers to dance and musical exchanges (Fox and Rivera-Salgado 2004).

¹⁷³ Michoacán also has an indigenous population, mostly composed of Purépechas, Nahuátl, and Mazahuas.

eventually herself involvement are all important to her ethnic identity construction. Her parent's constant use of Zapoteco has also been a factor to her indigenous ethnicity formation as Zapoteca.

Prior to college, I didn't see myself as indigenous; it was more of a racial distinction. Reading about my people's history, their struggles back in Oaxaca and now here—everything made sense then; all the transnational activities we had done were more easily understood. That led me to become involved with the FIOB.¹⁷⁴

The racial labeling of Oaxaqueños as “Oaxaquita,” “Oaxaco,” or “Indio” occurs well beyond high school in the U.S., but nevertheless is critically challenged by the youth's experience in Oaxacalifornia and with the knowledge they gain in the university. What is more, U.S. racial distinctions— primarily based on skin color and overall physical features— have historically been used by the Mexican and U.S. government to support the fiction of White and mestizo racial superiority.¹⁷⁵ While physical forms of discrimination are also prevalent for Oaxaca-based students, the lack of people of colors' history and social issues in basic education curricula continues to stratify interracial relations. Issues of racial discrimination are not easily addressed in the classroom.¹⁷⁶ If these issues were addressed it would improve the racial and ethnic tensions among today's U.S. youth.

Another case that proves my point that college education and political participation has influenced Oaxaqueños in retaking their indigeneity is Beatriz Matias example. Beatriz just finished her undergraduate work at UC Berkeley and this fall

¹⁷⁴ The FIOB (Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales) is a binational organization founded in Los Angeles in 1991. It is mostly composed of indigenous migrant and nonmigrant Oaxaqueños. They have various chapters throughout California and Mexico.

¹⁷⁵ Race Critical Theory looks at a top-down approach of racial categorizing.

¹⁷⁶ This is briefly described in the education section of this chapter.

entered graduate school. Like Estrella, both her parents migrated from the Sierra Juárez, but she was born in Los Angeles. She grew up participating in dances with other countrymen and women in her village's fiestas in Los Angeles. Growing up with the traditions of her pueblo, through fiestas or kermeses with traditional food, dances and music, has made Beatriz identify more with her pueblo than with her home in the U.S. Growing up, she recalls her father avoided being called out as Oaxaqueño and therefore avoided any type of involvement with his local townspeople. On the other hand, her mom's political involvement with the FIOB has kept her engaged in her pueblo's transnational politics. Like Estrella, Beatriz is starting to academically write on her pueblo's transnational activities.¹⁷⁷

When asked how indigenous young adult identity is reinforced in second generation Oaxaqueños, Beatriz said the following:

For the youth of my pueblo playing in *la banda* and dancing is where much of this identity takes place. They bring together the traditional music of the band with U.S. English music. In one dancers *traje* (costume) you could see the same thing, a patch of the Virgin Mary with letters (S.B.Z.) of my pueblo underneath and on the other side an L.A. patch, resembling that of the Dodgers.¹⁷⁸

Merging the experience of urban life in L.A. and the cultural practices and festivities of their pueblos brings these youth pride in maintaining their Oaxican identity. It is the cultural expression of the "urban Indian" that for some people, especially in Mexico cannot exist. Their experience growing up Oaxican in Los Angeles reminds us that two

¹⁷⁷ Other Oaxacan students who are politically active in the FIOB include Sylvia Ventura Luna, a Mixtec graduate student at the University of California, Riverside and Saraít Martínez, a Zapoteca graduate student in Fresno. As of October 15, 2011 Silvia became the new Binational Women's Coordinator of the FIOB and Saraít is the first Binational Youth Coordinator.

¹⁷⁸ You can also find this in *El Tequio Magazine* (no.3, Segunda Parte) that is written by Janet Martínez.

cultures can exist together.¹⁷⁹ In this way they seek to share their “old” culture with the “new” as they channel through a country that looks down upon non-White or mestizo elite culture. Interestingly, almost every single person that dances in their pueblo’s dance group or the other two Oaxacan dance groups are young men and women born and raised in California.

Another example of youth’s cultural participation occurs in the *Banda Juvenil Solaga U.S.A.*¹⁸⁰ All of the children and adult youth in the band are second-generation. Their cultural and civic participation in their pueblo’s band connects them as part of the new Oaxican or Solagueños of their community. The director of the band Don Baha, proudly described the impact of these jóvenes in the pueblo:

Es un orgullo que nuestros jovenes, descendientes Oaxaqueños, Solagueños, se identifican plenamente como tales, que les guste nuestra cultura—la cultura que lleva nuestra banda como Solagueños Oaxaqueños. Estos jóvenes creciendo en otra cultura estan poniendo su talento en aprender la música de nuestra tierra y en difundirlo y preservarlo.

It’s an honor that our youth, Oaxacan descendants, Solagueños [from the pueblo of Solaga] are entirely identifying as such, that they like our culture—the culture that our Solagan Oaxacan band carries. These youth who are growing in another culture are putting their talent in learning the music of our land and are transmitting it and preserving it.

Don Baha’s comment demonstrates that the early cultural involvement of second-generation is an incentive in building a strong relationship with their pueblo. Even though they do not necessarily identify as Zapotecos or indigenous it becomes part of their politicization process to later reclaim their indigeneity when in college. Daniel Melero Malpica wrote that the impact of cultural encounters for Oaxacan migrants in Los

¹⁷⁹ Some emerging Oaxaqueño rappers that express their experience growing as indigenous Mexicans in their music are Miguel Villegas who lives in Fresno and Mare who lives in Oaxaca City. Miguel raps in English, Spanish, and Mixteco, while Mare raps in Zapoteco and Spanish.

¹⁸⁰ The name of the pueblo is Solaga. It is located in the Sierra Juárez.

Angeles is "...being exposed to musical rhythms of Mexico (and the U.S.) [and as a result] incorporate this music into their social events."¹⁸¹ This incorporation of two cultures provides spaces where Oaxican students can relate with other peers their different experience growing-up as an indigenous Mexican student in Los Angeles.

Many of the students in my study at some point of their lives became involved in Oaxacan affairs either culturally by dancing or by playing in the traditional band. At a later time, usually in college, they became politically involved with an indigenous Oaxacan organization like the Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales (FIOB). Sandra Mendez, a twenty-three-year-old Zapoteca who recently graduated from UCLA and is part of the FIOB has been in a Oaxacan dance group since she was a child. She described her identity as, "Soy Solagueña (from the pueblo of Solaga), Oaxaqueña, Zapoteca." When asked if there was any particular difference between these identities she replied:

Among my paisanos and other people in the Sierra yes, there are differences. For others who do not know of Solaga or the Sierra I'll use my indigenous identity as Zapoteca or Oaxaqueña if they ask me how I racially identify. [...] but my indigenous identity was definitely as a result of my politicization and educational experience in college [...] I majored in Sociology and Labor Studies so I took many Latino study courses that focused on inequality, the history of minorities in the U.S. and other Latin American Studies courses which made me aware of my history as an indigenous woman. Eventually, I was introduced to the FIOB while in UCLA.

For Sandra, her territorial identity was important because of her continual participation through dances and other celebrations she has taken part in with her community. Her parents' involvement in their hometown association and their participation in the Solagan

¹⁸¹ Daniel Melero Malpica, "Indigenous Mexican Migrants in a Modern Metropolis: The Reconstruction of Zapotec Communities in Los Angeles," in *Latino L.A.: Transformations, Communities, and Activism*, ed. Enrique C. Ochoa and Gilda L. Ochoa (Tucson, Arizona: The University of Arizona Press, 2005), 122.

Church group were factors she expressed for being so closely tied to her pueblo. Furthermore, her liberal arts education in college brought her a Oaxaqueña and Zapoteca identity she did not have before. Because of the knowledge she gained from reading about minority people's history in the United States and in Latin America Sandra's political consciousness made her get involved with the FIOB.¹⁸² She is now part of the organizing committee for the Mujeres Indígenas en Liderazgo (MIEL) project to empower indigenous woman through the knowledge of their history, rights, and in preventing violence against women.

In another of my interviews, despite the fact that Eduardo Lopez's parents have never been involved in their hometown association or cultural groups the unity of his extended family maintained some of their Oaxaqueño cultural practices as immigrants. Although his parents have never been active Eduardo's ethnic formation developed in college as he became politically active. Eduardo was born in the central valley of Oaxaca and brought to the US at age one with both of his parents.¹⁸³ When asked how he experienced school as a Oaxacan child he responded that there were a few kids that called him "Oaxaco" or "Indio." At the moment he said, "I didn't make much of it but later I told my dad about the incident and he was furious. He explained to me that many indigenous groups live in Oaxaca and that we are 'indígenas no Indios. Even though that's all he told me it got me thinking a bit more of being Oaxaqueño" His dad's

¹⁸² What is interesting was that very few college students used a pan-ethnic identity as previous studies of Mexican-migrant children have shown. I suggest this is because of the feelings of exclusion by dominant society in the U.S. and by Mexicans and Latinos in general towards indigenous peoples (and even Afro-descendants). Therefore, taking a pride of as part of a group that continues to be discriminated is now a sign of inclusion and pride for some youth.

¹⁸³ Eduardo crossed the dessert in a backpack with a Oaxacan chocolate in his mouth to prevent him from crying and potentially getting caught by the border patrol as he made his way to L.A.

comment made him think that he was different from other Mexican children at school.

Eduardo moved on to describe how his indigenous identity developed:

I felt different to other Mexican kids because I was darker than them and did not have colored eyes, but that was it. When I started community college I became active in a Latin American student group. The year I became the president of that group was the same year of the 2006 movements in Oaxaca. Going to the protest here in L.A. and showing films of the movement in Oaxaca at my community college was something that empowered me in my Oaxaqueño identity.

Eduardo, like other informants, eventually got involved in Latin American or Latino organizations on campus and used these as a space to integrate past and present history made by indigenous Mexicans. For him the reclaiming of an indigenous identity occurred when he was in community college. The taking of Latin American history courses and U.S. courses on the 1960s social movements was his politicization process that influenced him to reclaim his Zapotecness. When asked about his involvement in the FIOB he said:

I had transferred to UCLA when I found out about the FIOB. I started going to the meetings and what caught my attention was that pretty much all the active FIOB-LA members were Oaxaqueños. I had never seen a room filled with Oaxaqueños where they discussed political issues of Oaxaqueños in California and Mexico. Other UCLA peers of whom I had no idea were Oaxacan were also there. It was for me a place where I was able to find commonality with other Zapoteco college students.

Eduardo has been in the FIOB for four years. Unlike previous youth who participated in civic and cultural activities at a young age, Eduardo's participation came in college. His involvement with a Latin American student club and later in the Frente Indígena has encouraged him to continue his education as a Zapoteco student. Like other college students in the FIOB he has written an article on the FIOB's magazine El Tequio. His article discusses the negotiation of an indigenous identity among indigenous Mexicans

and Chicanos in California. For Eduardo seeing other Oaxaqueño youth politically involved in Oaxacan affairs has been a factor that has motivated his research interest as a PhD student in History. Eduardo is now doing research on his pueblo's political history.

This suggests that studies in the social sciences have a strong correlation with the jóvenes taking an indigenous identity (or collective identity) as Zapotecos. Even though, they were not specific to using the local or national constitution in Mexico (to describe their right to self-identify and not be discriminated as second-generation Zapotecos) few of them did use a general indigenous rights discourse to make their claims. The participation of their parents and their experience growing up in two cultures takes on a heavier role in determining their Zapotec identity as second-generation who are the first in their families and pueblo to go to college. Unlike students in Oaxaca, California-based Zapotecos were more concerned with their ethnic consciousness and the reclaiming of their indigeneity as a politicization process in the migrant communities of “here” (Los Angeles) and “there” (Oaxaca). Described below differences Oaxacan-based youth used to describe their Zapotecness, such as speaking an indigenous language were not primary descriptions youth in L.A. described for “being indigenous.”¹⁸⁴

It is important to mention that speaking Zapoteco was not a major concern in their indigeneity formation. Unlike Zapoteco youth in Oaxaca, language was barely a main indicator of their identity. For them language was expressed in their concern for the growing loss of speaking Zapoteco among second-generation students, especially as almost every single parent of my interviewees spoke Zapoteco. For their families

¹⁸⁴ Wearing traditional clothing or being raised in a Oaxacan rural pueblo were also not used by Zapotecos in L.A. I only mention the importance of not using language since that was the primary characteristic Zapotecos in Oaxaca used to describe their Indianness.

speaking Zapoteco was a private space of expression because they could speak in confidence without other Mexicans or Latinos being able to understand them.

While the majority of my informants did not speak Zapoteco, they believed it was important to sustain the language, especially if “back home” their relatives spoke it. Of my informants none fluently spoke it, four understood it at a basic level, and the remaining sixteen had no understanding of it. Those who did not speak the language expressed that the past three generations of their family had not spoken it and therefore they did not know it. What is more, Estrella, Leslie, and Beatriz, Raul and five other of my interviewees expressed their parents did not teach them Zapoteco for reasons they suspect were due to feelings of embarrassment from their parents as early indigenous migrants in Los Angeles. Estrella and another one of my informants, Claudia, expressed that their parents did not teach them Zapoteco because it was of no use in the U.S. Claudia said, “I wish I could have learned it but when I asked my mom why they [and her father] didn’t teach me she said, ‘porque aqui lo importante es el Ingles y Español.’” Unfortunately, it is often the case that second-generation Oaxicans are not being taught Zapoteco even when their parents, uncles and other extended family in Los Angeles speak it. Not being able to speak the language, however, does not stop them from carrying a Oaxican identity.

Since the loss of native languages has been so high, language should not be a determinant factor for states like Oaxaca to determine one’s indigeneity. Using language as a proxy for indigeneity relies on the false assumptions that identity remains constant and that one must speak the language in order to have the type of “authenticity” that proves one is indigenous. In other words, the use of language to control a historically

unwanted population makes accounting for indigenous peoples smaller than what it really may be. I am not saying that race alone or other physical characteristics should be used to recognize one's identity. Rather, being indigenous involves many factors that go beyond physical phenotype. Identity is a feeling that one carries in their consciousness, in their minds and simply part of their lives that is impossible to singly define. Unfortunately, this stereotypical categorization through language has become popular in Mexico, more so than in the United States. In contrast, race is more commonly used in the U.S. to distinguish groups from others.¹⁸⁵

Zapoteco youth in Oaxaca agree that language is a primary component of “being Indian,” while U.S. Zapotec youth do not necessarily agree. Childhood experiences in the non-multicultural and English school curricula also proved a strong factor in language loss. While some literature argues that the loss of a native language for parents and children living outside of Mexico is a result of having adopted “valores urbanos” (urban values), the above reasons found in my research show that language alone certainly can not explain a person's identity.¹⁸⁶ Language plays an important role in distinguishing Zapotec youth identity in Oaxaca. In contrast to my finding in Chapter 3, however, the Zapotec language is not a primary factor in identity construction in Los Angeles as it is in Oaxaca.

Conclusion

¹⁸⁵ The “one-drop rule” (used during slavery as having one drop of black blood made you black) is the best example of how the government has labeled people in terms of race; this of course has been very problematic. I understand race as a social construction that changes depending on the place.

¹⁸⁶ Marta Romer, *¿Quién soy? Estrategias identitarias entre hijos de migrantes indígenas* (Mexico D.F., Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2009), 190.

I have shown that other factors, such as the political and civic participation of Oaxacan youth are important to identify as an influence to reclaim their indigeneity in college. Zapoteco parents' level of transnational participation is transferred to their college or non-college educated youth in Los Angeles, California. These parents' forms of participation influence their children to take on distinctive ethnic identities. This chapter shows that the early civic and cultural participation of second-generation youth in their pueblo is more likely to form a Zapoteco/Oaxacan interest in them when they go to college. Eventually, the knowledge they gain in liberal arts courses while in college and their close relationship with their community will influence them in their indigeneity process.

The historical discrimination experienced by Oaxacan migrants remains present in the next generation as they grow up in Los Angeles. I found that being civically involved in their community, as well as politically, may to an extent impede Zapoteco children from feeling shame, sadness, or a sense of "being inferior" to other Mexican children in their early education. What is more, those that have a college education (in the social sciences) are able to build on a collective ethnic identity, but are also more likely to do so if they are politically involved, rather than civically. The ethnic enclaves of Oaxaqueños in Mid-City, South Central and Pico-union neighborhoods will continue to be a "home away from home" for U.S. and Oaxacan-born youth who wish to maintain their cultural traditions and relationship to their pueblo as second-generation Oaxicans.

Conclusion

In this particular study I have shown that political and civic participation have inspired Zapoteco youth in Oaxaca City and Los Angeles to reclaim their indigeneity while in college. The reclaiming of their identity is a political, social, cultural act that is a result of their political consciousness gained from knowing about their history, rights, and contemporary indigenous issues in the classroom. These youth are the new generation of intellectuals not only in their fields of study, but also in their pueblo. Their high educational attainment, previous and current relationship with their pueblo influences them in opposing further marginalization of their communities.

Whereas language, clothing, and growing-up in a rural pueblo are important to indigenous people's survival, they should not be sole indicators of "being indigenous." Continuing these forms of characteristics to classify people only reinforces racial hierarchies and cultures imposed by the state. Both the national and the Oaxacan constitution guarantee indigenous peoples' to identify as they wish. Therefore, indigeneity should not be an imposed classification. Described by Gaspar Rivera-Salgado, "it is a sense of being and a sense of belonging" characterized in language, culture, clothing, traditions, celebrations, ways of governance, music, food, being raised in a pueblo, etc. In the 21st century the role of young adults in identifying as Zapotecos, Mixtecos, Triques, or to other indigenous groups is greatly significant to the survival of indigenous peoples throughout the world.

For my interviewees this process occurs in college through their continual participation with indigenous communities or organizations (specially the case of young Zapoteco FIOB members in Los Angeles). Of course the prior civic relationship students

have with their pueblo(s) is crucial in youth's consciousness to their identity formation. From a sociological perspective race and ethnicity is seen as a social construction that has serious consequences as to how one is perceived and treated. For U.S.-based students, the knowledge they gain is critical in their thinking of race and ethnicity in the United States. For Oaxacan-based youth their knowledge and political actions question the ethnic classification of indigenous peoples that often minimize the role of race and racial discrimination in Mexico. While equally significant in Oaxaca, a state with the highest indigenous population where low educational attainment and poverty are constantly prevalent saying, "es nuestro derecho a identificarnos como querramos" is strong. Even though students in Oaxaca were more likely to use state labeling markers to describe their Indianness these were followed by their own descriptions. In such expression indigenous youth are bringing the rural and urban life experiences of what it means to be young and indigenous in the 21st century.

The teaching of their rights, history, and culture empowers their Zapotecness. Since K-12 education provides very little to no literature and teachings of marginalized people's history and contemporary issues they were less likely to take on their indigenous identity. Instead, racial and cultural remarks by other students and faculty caused them to reject their identity. Negative connotations like, "India Maria," "India baja del cerro," "No seas Indio/a" or "Tenias que ser India" were heard by many Oaxaqueño students during their basic schooling in Mexico and the United State. Their lack of knowledge in history and rights as young children makes them have feelings of shame and so many of them grow-up denying their identity. These experiences make it important for college youth to constantly use their knowledge of history and rights as factors that reinforce

their indigeneity. For them their awareness of history, rights, and contemporary indigenous issues as college students are tools that help them counter stereotypical notions.

We must remember that identity is not stable, however. At specific moments people are more inclined to identify with a particular group given the situation that allows for it to occur. For example, during indigenismo (1940s to 1980s), and prior to indigenous rights in 1989, people were less likely to call themselves indigenous. A feeling of shame was reflected upon them, which was the result of equating Indian to being uneducated, backwards—primitive people. These state controlled institutions, like INEGI and the indigenista policies in the educational system created a moment in history which denied indigenous peoples to freely practice their culture and language. While indigenista policies have ended agencies like the Mexican census continue to narrowly identify who is indigenous. The debate for the right to self-identify will continue among the current generation of Zapotecos who want proudly call themselves Zapoteco/a or Oaxican.

The discourse on rights have created a space in which people are more willing to identify as Zapoteco, Mixteco, Chinanteco, or to any other indigenous group today. International indigenous rights have been created with the partaking of various Indian groups in some countries. Identity, therefore, is not stable or singular as Oaxacan institutions imply. As long as the nation-state exercises control of these rights and the recognition of a multicultural state are simply recognition in paper indigenous groups will continue to be marginalized if they do not demand respect for their rights. For this reason

the creation and re-creation of indigeneity among today's college youth generation is important in preventing a community's non-assimilationist pressure like before.

Because of the actions that indigenist institutions took in the last century to create a national Mexican identity for the building of the nation-state, indigenous movements today have increasingly taken off throughout Latin America. Organized mobilization efforts, sit-ins, protest, and road blocks have taken center stage in Oaxaca as indigenous peoples demand their rights to be respected. Various indigenous Oaxacan groups in Mexico and the United States have been deep-seated in their organizing efforts as indigenous Oaxacans to question state hegemony despite death threats and fear for their lives to do so.¹⁸⁷

The national seminar, "Juventudes Indígenas de México" in Chiapas became an avenue not only where Zapotecs negotiated their identity and intellectual experiences, but where other indigenous groups also shared their experiences as a new generation in higher education. At the same time, the second-generation of Oaxaqueño members in the Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales is a space where they can claim their indigeneity even though they were born or raised in the United States.

For L.A.-born or raised Zapotecos their identity becomes "a racialized category within a Mexican immigrant community."¹⁸⁸ As a result these youth become influenced in the way that they have appropriated their "dark-skin" and "short-height" as a proud symbol of their Oaxacan Indianness.¹⁸⁹ The feelings of shame, however, are invisible for

¹⁸⁷ The taking of arms among Triques in San Juan Copala and the military to preserve the "usos y costumbres" government have led to the assassination of leaders.

¹⁸⁸ Lynn Stephen, *Transborder Lives: Indigenous Oaxacan in Mexico, California, and Oregon* (Durham, North Carolina, 2007), 210.

¹⁸⁹ We know however, these physical characteristics do not are not shared by all Oaxaqueños.

those whose parents, and themselves have participated in transnational social and cultural activities since childhood. They shared that while they may have gained much of their knowledge on indigenous history their *auto-definición* (self-identity) happened when they joined the FIOB or CBDIO. Interestingly, the absence of a college education was correlated with youth that took a territorial-identity. In other words, youth that did not have a college education were more likely to identify as being Zochinense (from San Jerónimo Zochina) or Tlacolulense (being from Tlacolula de Matamoros). This shows that with education a collective identity takes place. The sense of belonging to a larger group, especially one in which you have been unaware of happens for these second generation Oaxaqueños.

The feeling of belonging is important when negotiating identities. Ethnic enclaves have helped maintain culture, traditions, and communication with town villagers. While this “imagined community” has taken more interest in the migrant case, it is also valid for internal migrants who come from small villages to settle in Oaxaca City. In the process of their experience “away from home” they have become involved by forming hometown associations, *la banda*, and other traditions practiced back in their place of origin. More so in Los Angeles, than in Oaxaca, these transnational activities may be reasons that they were more likely to identify as indigenous, than in Oaxaca (e.g., APPO-Comerciantes).

As shown, the current political climate of indigenous and state relations for both U.S. and Mexico-based Zapotecos has allowed them to participate in an open Indian identity discourse where their experiences and intellectuality take place. However, to think that indigenous Oaxaqueño living in the U.S. cannot be indigenous does not only reinforce the state’s way of perceiving, but wrongly suggest that they have been

acculturated and assimilated to the Anglo-culture. The comment made by young man in the Chiapas youth conference, “Hay muchos gringos aquí,” in reaction to three Oaxacalifornianos present, reinforces this idea.

Different moments of time in Oaxaca have impacted, one way or another, Oaxaqueños living outside the territory. The most recent event was the 2006 movement that paralyzed the city for half-a-year during the teacher’s strike. This event brought about a specific interest for many of the youth interviewed for this thesis. Although most of them were too young to get involved the images shown of television, and experiencing both directly and indirectly these effects caught their attention. They expressed that the formation of the Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca (APPO) made it more accessible for indigenous organizations and even non-affiliated indigenous peoples to feel part of the movement, and therefore demand respect for their rights. In Los Angeles the same was expressed. Marches done by the FIOB, COCIO (Coalicion de Comunidades Indígenas de Oaxaca— primarily a culturally focused group in San Diego), and other organizations caught the attention of the Oaxacan community living in greater Los Angeles as streets had to be closed from Mid-City to the Mexican Consulate. This moment is further seen as a motivating factor for a Zapotec identity as has been stated in the previous chapters.

While the percentage of Zapotecs in higher education may not be statistically significant it is important to study since they are the new generation that are continuing to take an ethnic identity. In the last few years Michael Kearney and Federico Besserer started a research project in which they would closely work with university educated Mixtecos in northern California. The purpose was to analyze how this new generation of

California-based Mixtecos maintained their Indian identity, even as some were born and raised in the U.S.

Recently, a youth group that is mostly composed of Mixtecos formed in Fresno, California, calling themselves “Autónomos Young Oaxaqueños” their mission is to “preserve indigenous culture, indigenous languages with equality, pride, and respect in their communities.”¹⁹⁰ Groups like the Autónomos demonstrate the strong tie that these students have had in their Oaxacalifornian enclave to that in their community of origin in Oaxaca, Mexico. Using Spanish and English in their name they show their rural experience in California as young Oaxicans that want to be independent from any political parties.

The research set about in this thesis contributes to the existing literature on indigenous identity among Oaxaqueños by adding an often over looked population—youth, especially those in education. The actions of young Zapotec students have recently caught the attention of a few scholars and researchers, especially in the US. Furthermore, this research adds to existing research of San Diegan second-generation Mixtecs students in middle-school and high school, and to an overwhelmingly indigenous Oaxacan literature because it takes into account a transnational approach. It too is based on a binational case study (two sites—the United States and Mexico) that analyzes ethnicity of indigenous college students. As the incorporation of new educated generations negotiate their identities, this comparative case study may provide indigenous Mexican studies both in Mexico and the United States different ways of critically engaging a discourse on transnationalism. As well, the effects of ongoing binational practices between “here” and

¹⁹⁰ Autónomos Young Oaxaqueños facebook website page.

“there” continue to have a strong impact towards the young today in re-creating their identities.

In furthering this research it is important to ask the following: Why is, in the general sense, college important to the formation of an indigenous self-identity among youth? Specifically, since this present research looks at the experience of college-youth in the liberal arts, one must continue to explore whether it is a particular educational growth in History, Sociology, Political Science, Anthropology, etc. where an ethnic consciousness occurs or does it also occur among other indigenous youth who are in the sciences and other fields? While I have included a limited example of Zapotec descendants who do not have a college education I am aware that having a greater sample to compare with those who are in college (in the United States and Mexico) can contribute to future studies of this kind. For now given the limited time constraints my arguments that: indigenous youth are contesting the homogenization of their identity by asserting their identity is specific to this case study.

Epilogue: “No me llames Oaxaquita” Campaign

As a work in progress, rather than an ending project ongoing situations remind us that much still lies to be addressed socio-politically and academically. The next brief account occurred right after I finished the writing of this research. It resonates many of the voices of the youth I interviewed here. Furthermore, it shows the power that organized communities can have when saying “Ya no más!” to (racial) discrimination.

The headlines of various national and international newspapers and television news read: “No me llames Oaxaquita” (Don’t call me Oaxaquita or Indio) a derogatory term towards Oaxaqueños that implies being dark-skinned, short, and ignorant. On Thursday, May 17, 2012 the Mixteco-Indígena Community Organizing Project (MICOP) held a news conference in Oxnard to publically announce their efforts to reduce discrimination towards indigenous Mexicans, specifically toward children and students. Oxnard, a city north of Los Angeles has a significant Oaxacan and agricultural working population. Although not particular to one student’s racial encounter this specific situation arose when a young boy came home from school one day. Frustrated by the constant racial harassment and bullying of his peers he told his mother, Doña Elvia Pacheco: “Te odio mama por ser indígena. Me quiero matar.”¹⁹¹ The young boy continued telling Doña Pacheco, who is Mixteca (his dad is from Guanajuato), that if she made him go to school he was going to kill himself.¹⁹² Worried, she pressed on his comment and the boy told her that a teacher and other Mexican kids were constantly

¹⁹¹ “‘No me llames Oaxaquita’ Press Conference,” Mixteco/Indígena Community Organizing Project (MICOP): Aiding and empowering indigenous Oaxacan immigrants in Ventura County, accessed June 9, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GIcNhphYmY>

¹⁹² Paloma Esquivel, “Epithet that divides Mexicans is banned by Oxnard school district,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 28, 2012, accessed May 29, 2012, <http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-indigenous-derogatory-20120528,0,3018233.story>

making fun of him for being Oaxacan, calling him “Oaxaquita,” “Indio,” and from his teacher, “Aren’t you embarrassed of being Oaxacan? I hear your mom talking that language.”

Shortly thereafter, Oaxaqueños organized through the MICOP to run the campaign “No me llames Oaxaquita.” After much dialogue and meetings with school officials in May 23, 2012 the Oxnard Unified School District adopted MICOP’s Resolution for the Respect of Indigenous Peoples to ban the use of these racist terms in schools and they put on the table solutions to this problem.¹⁹³ The Resolution reads as follows:

Resolution for Respect of Indigenous Peoples

For the School District of the Oxnard Plains

- **Whereas** mutual respect for all cultures and ethnicities is a key to healthy communities;
- **Whereas** student success and achievement is greatly enhanced in an environment which actively promotes such mutual respect and embraces cultural diversity;
- **Whereas** 20,000 residents of Ventura County who speak Mixteco regularly face bullying and denigration of their culture and language through the use of words such as “Oaxaquita” and “Indito;”
- **Whereas** the Mixteco-speaking population has come together through MICOP’s “No me llames Oaxaquita” campaign to combat such bullying and its effects on our young people;

Be it resolved that:

- Our School District resolves to prohibit the use of the denigrating terms “Oaxaquita” and “Indito” in its institution.

¹⁹³ “No me llames Oaxaquita! Don’t Call me Little Oaxacan” Campaign, Mixteco/Indígena Community Organizing Project, accessed June 8, 2012, <http://www.mixteco.org/News.php>

- Our School District will promote a climate of cultural respect and diversity by supporting the formation of an anti-bullying committee consisting of administrators, teachers, students, parents and community members. This committee will monitor problems relating to bullying and will make recommendations for promoting a respectful environment. It is anticipated and desirable that representatives from all ethnicities, cultural groups, and sexual orientations will participate in the district committee.
- Our School District will promote Mexican Indigenous History within their curriculum.

The value of knowing ones history is extremely important in shaping a persons' identity.

While it is not my intention to imply that education alone shapes identities or creates a political consciousness, maintaining strong ties with the community of origin encourages them to reject what marginalize them.

The power of knowledge and community is a tool that will further furnish safe spaces for other indigenous Mexicans in the United States and Mexico to empower their identity as Oaxaqueños and at the same time indígenas. These spaces will reconceptualize the way in which young students combat racism to a broader level that take the students' and their community's own experience into account when dealing with the situation at hand. They will also reconceptualize and act out on the poor ways in which public educational institutions, administrations, and overall state controlled public education eliminate cultural awareness programs and studies.

APPENDIX

ILLUSTRATIONS



Figure 1: Major ethnic groups and regions in Oaxaca.

Source: Instituto de Órganos Históricos de Oaxaca, México.



Figure 2: Overview of Zapotec ethnic disbursement in Oaxaca.

Source: eumed.net



Photograph 1: “Juventudes Indígenas de México” National Seminar.

Photo by: Brenda Nicolás, 2010



Photograph 2: Election of youth representatives to address the issues before hand.

Photo by: Brenda Nicolás, 2010

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