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## Aztecs Are Not Indigenous: Anthropology and the Politics of Indigeneity

*To write about Indigeneity means already being deeply enmeshed in identity politics. The much researched rural south of Mexico City is a case in point. Anthropologists have described the Nahuatl speakers of Milpa Alta as “heirs of the Aztecs,” and knowledge of Nahuatl and folklore has become key to maintaining municipal land rights in the context of current multiculturalist politics. Thus, Nahuatl has become a politicized marker of prestige. This has led to various tensions, including acrimonious competition over what constitutes the “correct” way of speaking Nahuatl and frictions with newly arrived speakers of other Indigenous languages. To avoid exacerbating these tensions, I suggest that anthropologists should commit to decolonizing their work by politically and epistemologically situating it and by adopting participatory approaches, as well as an iterative, adaptive approach to research ethics. This means continuously reevaluating and tailoring one’s ethics to concrete situations as they emerge—and never truly leaving “the field.” [Identity politics, decolonization, Nahuatl language]*

### Introduction

**T**here is much at stake in being Indigenous in Milpa Alta, a rural municipality in the south of Mexico City. I realized this when Lizbeth, a middle-aged folkloric dancer, declared, “We dance and sing in Nahuatl to show that we have cultura. We are not indígenas.”

Anthropologists who identify whom they are working with as “Indigenous” are conducting inherently political research, as they are enmeshed in a complex politics of Indigeneity. The question this raises is not how anthropologists might deal with this “obstacle” to the pursuit of our research agendas, but instead how they might avoid being ourselves a problem for the people they work with. This essential question is one that Native Studies scholars have been discussing for some time, and that is increasingly pre-occupying anthropologists as well. I lack the space to summarize this important debate here (but see Smith 2012; Simpson 2014). Instead, I will address some of the ways in which anthropologists have, wittingly or unwittingly, intervened in Mexican Indigeneity politics, focusing on the example of Milpa Alta. I will close with suggesting how anthropologists might use their considerable power in more responsible and equitable ways, for instance, by centering Indigenous scholarship in the discipline.

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## The Originarios of Milpa Alta

When she said it, Lizbeth's statement stunned me. Milpa Alta, a community of approximately 130,000 people in the South of Mexico City, has often been described as a *Nahua* or "Indigenous" space in anthropological texts (e.g., Wachter Rodarte 2006). Based on my training in Boasian<sup>1</sup> anthropology, I was primed to think of Milpaltenses (the people of Milpa Alta) as "ethnically Nahuatl," which assumes that culture, language, and identity are tightly linked, giving rise to specific worldviews and cosmologies, or what is commonly referred to as *cosmovisión* in Mesoamerican anthropology (López Austin 1990; Broda 1991). In this particular sense, I naively assumed that families in which Nahuatl had been spoken for generations were "Indigenous."

In anthropology, Indigeneity tends to refer to (1) ethnolinguistic or cultural belonging, (2) a shared historical experience of colonialism, (3) and in more recent times, a political identity within a multiculturalist and international human rights framework (cf. Niezen 2003; Canessa 2005; Martínez Novo 2006). However, the people whose ancestors were native to Mexico City's territory typically self-describe themselves as *originarios* (original/native people) instead. In part, this is because *indio* (Indian) and *indígena* (Indigenous person) are interchangeably used as racist slurs by many urban middle-class *mestizos* (mixed-race people, i.e. the majority population of Mexico; see Flores Farfán 2009, 150). Rather than simply rejecting racism, some Milpaltenses also internalize and perpetuate it: Claiming an identity as originarios allows Milpaltenses to distinguish themselves from poorer Indigenous immigrants to the city (see Medina Hernández 2007; López Caballero 2009) as well as from "more Indigenous" Milpaltenses. They associate these *indígenas* with "backwardness," while basing their own perceived superiority on structural privileges<sup>2</sup> and the privileged role of Aztec symbolism in Mexico's nation-building project (Lomnitz 2001). For instance, Nahuatl place names are ubiquitous in Mexico City, which was built over the site of the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan. Milpaltenses' self-image as superior "modern Aztecs" has also been influenced by van Zantwijk's ethnography of Milpa Alta titled, "The heirs of the Aztecs" (1960).

Beyond Aztec pride, it is not in most Milpaltenses' interest to identify as *mestizos* in the present

context of liberal multiculturalism. Claiming a special status as originarios is key to protecting their communal land rights. Following Elizabeth Povinelli (2002), Milpaltenses need this political identity to demonstrate their authenticity, which paradoxically allows them to claim rights that have been historically withheld from them because of their Indigeneity. Even among originarios, I have observed a complex politics of distinction. There were lively debates, and often hurt feelings, around which individuals were wearing the most "historically accurate" (i.e., authentic) dance costume, who were most successful in attracting government resources and prestigious academics' attention for their cultural projects, and who owned specific Nahuatl-language texts in terms of "intellectual property." In sum, most Milpaltenses I knew sought to distinguish themselves both from *mestizos* and *indígenas*.<sup>3</sup>

Interestingly, some avid Nahuatl students in Milpa Alta were in fact urban *mestizos*. Diego, a 40-year-old musician from Xochimilco expressed wistfully, "I wish I were Indigenous." Urban middle-class nationalists and New Agers occasionally appropriate Indigeneity to lend their respective agendas authenticity (González Torres 1996). Diego's example shows that Indigenous identity is stereotyped both in ameliorative and pejorative ways, and not all who claim to be Indigenous, are necessarily recognized as such by other Indigenous people. In the United States, claims to Indigenous identity have proliferated in recent times and are a highly contested political issue (Deloria 1998; Sturm 2011). Thus, anthropologists cannot sidestep complicated questions of identity by adopting the words their interlocutors' use to refer to themselves in their ethnographies. Precisely because what ethnographers know of their interlocutors' multifaceted, ever-changing identities is inevitably limited, but their privileged status as academics lends legitimacy to claims about these identities, sensitivity and cautious contextualizations of Indigeneity as a performance are essential (cf. Graham and Glenn Perry 2014). Hostettler highlights the importance of empirical evidence and historical specificity: "[T]he emergence of ethnic identities may be highly influenced by sources external to the local context and may include the scholarly discourse on ethnicity [...]. The main focus of an inquiry of ethnicity must therefore be the context within which particular ethnic identities emerge" (2004, 188). I would add that ongoing ethical

reflections and consultations with study participants and their communities are crucial to avoiding misattributions.

## The Power and Risks of Anthropology

Demonstrably, Mexican anthropology has a strong influence both on policy-making and on how Indigenous people see themselves by constructing Indigeneity, and by compiling policy-relevant knowledge about those deemed to be Indigenous. Around the time of the revolution (1919–20), high-profile anthropologists, such as Manuel Gamio (1916, cited in Smith-Oka, 2013, 35), developed the ideology of *indigenismo*, in order to

homogenize the country's cultural and ethnic makeup to match the dominant society and in turn modernize the country. Liberal and progressive, most of these scholars advocated for the rights of indigenous people. They were the only ones who were concerned about the indigenous populations at all. (Smith-Oka, 2013; cf. Friedlander 2006)

The legacies of *indigenismo* remain palpable. For example, my doctoral research (Whittaker 2019) showed that a federal agency devoted to the protection of women's rights, *Inmujeres*, frequently collaborated with anthropologists in order to gather evidence of women's rights abuses in local communities and of culturally inflected attitudes toward these abuses. However, they missed the opportunity of employing ethnographic insights to test the assumptions underlying their centralized urban feminist approach and tailor the programs they offered to local needs. For example, *Inmujeres* often used terms such as “empowerment” and “victimhood” in their workshop descriptions, which were alienating to many middle-aged Nahuatl speakers who thought of themselves as already being powerful “strong women,” despite often being subject to violence from their partners. Thus, there was conceptual friction between *Inmujeres*' view of local women being the weak victims of more powerful men as opposed to some, typically older, local women's own perception of being strong in the face of violence. When I tried to explain local conceptions of strong womanhood at an *Inmujeres*-organized public forum in Milpa Alta, two mem-

bers of the audience denigrated my interlocutors as “backward”—a view that the *Inmujeres* representatives present did not contest.

The way my ethnographic descriptions were distorted, despite my protestations, suggest that naïve researchers risk causing considerable damage in entering this complex, politically charged context. A Milpaltense friend mentioned that a student of linguistics ran a Nahuatl competition with a group of native speakers and semispeakers some years ago, judging some speakers to be “good” and others “bad.” This ranking of linguistic ability led the group to split because at least a dozen “bad” speakers ceased to take part in Nahuatl-related activities, feeling ashamed. Beyond assigning authenticity, as in the example above, anthropologists also risk causing fissions and resentment in other ways, such as by associating themselves with particular groups, by publishing knowledge without permission, and by exploiting, neglecting, or disrespecting the people they work with. While the last two points should be obvious without further illustration,<sup>4</sup> problems of association may be more difficult to avoid and navigate. After doing research in the same village in Veracruz for decades, Sandstrom and Sandstrom write of experiencing “rejection by several families in our field site who will no longer deal with us because of our associations with certain other people” (2011, 28). In Milpa Alta, some of the more conservative Catholics were distrustful of my spending time with *nahual*-shaman's apprentices, whom some perceived as dangerous witches. Another awkward situation arose when a folkloric dance group split, and both groups were competing for my membership.

More subtly, unintended harm may derive from anthropologists' modes of representation, in sometimes unpredictable ways. This applies not only to their assigning, and thereby reifying, Indigeneity, but also to when their work is taken out of context, which is difficult to anticipate, and most likely to happen with illustrations and tables. For example, I found that images from López Austin's book on Nahuatl concepts surrounding the human body, *Cuerpo humano e ideología* (Human body and ideology, 2012) circulated in Milpaltense Nahuatl language classes without attribution, as if they were accurate depictions of current Milpaltense Nahuatl terminology and philosophy. This allowed academically trained promoters of Classical Nahuatl to use them as ammunition in linguistic disputes against defenders of vernacular Nawatl, who often had received less formal education.

Anthropologists would also do well to reflect on the ways in which their work can inspire cultural appropriation. In 1976, Gordon Whittaker, my father, commissioned a Zapotec weaver in Teotitlán, Oaxaca, to make a blanket with an Aztec Spider-Water design he had copied from the *Codex Magliabechiano*. When he returned, other weavers had reproduced this design, which he says they found elegant. New Age writer José Argüelles had also visited Teotitlán during that period, and subsequently popularized the symbol under the Maya name *Hunab Ku* (Argüelles 1987),<sup>5</sup> alias the “Galactic Butterfly.” The symbol became so famous that it was eventually reappropriated by other Indigenous Mexicans, as even communitarian police in Guerrero have been wearing it on their polo shirts (El Universal 2018).

As the contributions to this special issue show, anthropological research is inevitably subjective and interesting, and thus, ethnographic descriptions are often employed toward political ends. Reminiscent of Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle in Physics,<sup>6</sup> it appears that the observer inevitably modifies his or her object of study. To address this, ethnographers should “include [their] own presence as an object of ethnographic inquiry” (Warren 2006, 220).

### What Might Responsible Research Look Like?

Fieldwork transforms the fieldworker. After living in close proximity to others for many months, your experiences, your knowledge, and your objectives are no longer just yours, but are shared. In that sense, one never truly “leaves” the “field,” even if physically traveling to the other side of the globe. For me, that physical departure was a moment of deep sorrow and guilt. Remaining in touch with my Milpaltense friends did not seem enough. After I left, three people I had worked with died, and the two people I had been closest with suffered through major depression. The long absences during and in between long-term ethnographic research visits meant that I failed in my social obligations to mourn and care for my friends and family. Many nonnative Mesoamericanist anthropologists are deeply invested in their work, visiting their Indigenous friends often over the years, accepting ritual kinship roles as *comadres* and *compadres*, sometimes even choosing to live in Mexico permanently. However, this is not always possi-

ble. Regardless of one’s personal circumstances and commitments, can anthropologists—should they—do more?

Responding to recent developments in the discipline, Ortner (2016) envisioned three key roles for anthropology: (1) to describe social problems, (2) study or join social movements, and (3) envision alternative ways of living in the world. I would like to suggest that, in the Mesoamerican research context, collaborative and participatory approaches to fieldwork are essential to pursuing these points responsibly. With respect to (1), by centering research participants and collaborators’ views and priorities, anthropologists can avoid reifying and perpetuating social problems, instead contextualizing them within rich, dynamic, and creative individual and communal lives. Regarding (2), siding with a particular activist group can be problematic, if it contributes to deepening political fissures in the larger social group studied (see, e.g., Hernández Castillo 2001, on Indigenous women’s movements betwixt and between feminist and Indigenous movements). But anthropological collaborations can also be used more productively to foster dialogue and create platforms for exchange between rival groups. Finally, (3) might appear to make assumptions about anthropology’s privileged perspective, which would entrench the power inequality between researcher and subjects, as it is the anthropologist who mines alternative ways of life for value, extracting these for a globalized elite audience. Participatory and collaborative projects are crucial to ensuring that the exchange of ideas becomes mutually enriching for all parties involved.

In my own research, I sought to put these considerations into practice by allowing my conversations with cultural revitalization groups in Milpa Alta to steer the direction of my inquiry and by ensuring to embed discussions of violence within a wider description of women’s complex lives. Rather than concentrating on just one group, I worked with several women-led cultural groups and expressed solidarity with all of these, even when occasionally pressured to choose a side. Finally, working within a feminist epistemological frame of “situated perspectives” (Lamphere, Ragoné, and Zavella 1997), I am clear about the partial nature of my knowledge and have communicated my interpretations and ideas in an open dialogue with Milpaltenses over the years, answering questions about the situation in Europe. I plan to continue this conversation going forward.

A compatible example of engaged participatory research in the strict sense, is MacDougall's (2015) YUCAN collaboration in Chicán, Yucatán. As the founder of this nonprofit organization, she facilitated communication between local people and various branches of the state government, by brokering Indigenous critiques of the way in which state programs frame deafness as a disabling condition and Indigenous identity as being problematic. Foregrounding local people's own perspectives about their needs allowed MacDougall to put ethnographic practice into the service of "generating mutually rewarding programs of social assistance" (2015, 150).

## Conclusions

In light of the immense diversity of research contexts and researcher positionalities around the world, or even just within Mesoamerica, I am skeptical of one-size-fits-all approaches to research ethics. As Warren warns,

the bureaucratization and standardization of research ethics of state-controlled university research boards in the United States, which inappropriately use scientific clinical trials as their ethical template, renders these collaborative and politically responsive practices 'unethical'. (2006, 220)<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, to speak of "research ethics" as such obscures that many Indigenous peoples associate the word "research" with anything but ethical behavior.

The ways in which scientific research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism remains a powerful remembered history for many of the world's colonized peoples. [... Researchers] assume to know all that it is possible to know of us, on the basis of their brief encounters with some of us. It appalls us that the West can desire, extract and claim ownership of our ways of knowing, our imagery, the things we create and produce, and then simultaneously reject the people who created and developed those ideas. (Smith 2012, 30)

Anthropology cannot afford to exclude Indigenous researchers, knowledges, and languages. Consider the successes of the Zacatecas Institute for Teaching and Research in Ethnology, a Mexican nonprofit corporation founded in 2002, which supports Nahuatl-speaking scholars to pro-

duce Nahuatl-language publications and provides scholarships for them to collaborate with European scholars (Olko and Sullivan 2016). It is simply not enough to be allies in spirit without actively decolonizing the spaces and modes of knowledge-producing encounters. This means "hold[ing] us politically accountable to our interlocutors as well as to our own embodied reality, as part of the same liberatory struggle, albeit differentially located" (Berry et al. 2017, 558). The future of Mesoamericanist research lies in nurturing collectivities that critically deconstruct and politically engage differences and commonalities between researchers and research participants.

## Notes

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1. Notably, Boas was among the first anthropologists to conduct research in Milpa Alta (Karttunen 1999, 269).

2. Similar to the Peruvian context described by de la Cadena (1995), Milpaltenses often ascribe Indigeneity not only to Nahuatl speakers but also to poorer, female, and other marginalized members of their community.

3. Castañeda (2004), Hostettler (2004), and MacDougall (2015) have observed similar complexities surrounding the politics of identity in the Yucatec Maya context.

4. A particularly famous controversy regards Ted Strehlow's publishing of Australian aboriginal secret knowledge (McNally 1981, 188–189). See Smith 2012 and Simpson 2014 for examples from Oceania and the United States.

5. See Hoopes (2011) for details on Argüelles' role in crafting Mesoamerican mythology-inspired New Age metaphysics.

6. According to this principle, "the more precisely you measure a quantum particle's position, the less precisely you can know its momentum, and vice versa" (Fore 2018).

7. See also Bourgois' (1990) and Sanford's (2006) critiques of anthropological ethics.

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