Indigeneity: Local and Global Crossroads

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Cover Page Footnote
This article is from an earlier iteration of Diálogo which had the subtitle "A Bilingual Journal." The publication is now titled "Diálogo: An Interdisciplinary Studies Journal."

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As I am writing this editorial, Indigenous Peoples from throughout the Americas are meeting in Quito, Ecuador at the 20th Anniversary of the First Continental Encounter of Indigenous Peoples (June 14-16), under the “Kuntur Anka Pachacutic” (Wind of the Wings of the Eagle and the Condor) of Ayba Yala. The first encounter happened in the same city in 1990 and its central theme was the “Five Hundred Years of Resistance.” In these encounters, Indigenous Peoples have come together to share their stories and journeys, get to know and recognize each other, formulate political strategies and visions for the future, and cement their alliances and relationships. Next week, indigenous women and men, young and adult, the majority from Turtle Island (North America), but also indigenous migrants from throughout the Americas, will be meeting at the second United States Social Forum in Detroit, USA (June 22-26). While in this forum they will undertake the same activities, they also come to engage many other non-indigenous and mixed social movements that form part the worldwide process of “Another World Is Possible.” These large encounters and fora are among the many that have happened throughout Ayba Yala, where Indigenous Peoples have consolidated a strong internationalized indigenous movement with common agendas, strong networks, and shared visions. In the words of Tupac Enrique Acosta, Yaotachcahu:

These events are the tracks along the path of continuity and follow-through that vindicate and give strength to the process of decolonization of our continent Ayba Yala. And although we still have a long distance to travel, the road of encounter, confederation, and alliance at the continental level continues to guide with the illumination of our traditions, the hope of our liberation as Nations of Humanity.

In fact, since the 1970s, Indigenous Peoples of the Americas began to travel the continent, and to different international arenas, to bring their concerns for the physical and cultural survival of their pueblos, communities, and nations. In so doing, they have actively challenged states, non-governmental organizations, inter-governmental organizations, the United Nations, and civil society to rethink 500 years of exploitation, oppression, discrimination, ethniccide, and even genocide, and instead build new ways of imagining and living in a different world.

United Nations’ official data estimates that there are more than 370 million indigenous peoples and more than 5,000 indigenous groups living in 70-90 countries; they make up about one third of the world’s 900 million extremely poor rural people. In Latin America, 50 million Indigenous Peoples represent 11% of the total population. In the 1990s, the indigenous poverty gap in this region grew to be wider than in previous decades (see United Nations 2009). Indigenous activists realized four decades ago that the protection of their rights and redress to which they are entitled, due to historical legacies of colonialism and imperialism, could only be ensured first by influencing international law and policy-making. Indigenous Peoples of the Americas have been instrumental in the creation and consolidation of the Global Indigenous Movement, which today has a very strong voice in the United Nations and among some social movements transnational networks. They participated actively in the drafting and adoption process of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (adopted on September 13, 2007), a document of great historical consequences. Yet, the attainment of political, cultural, social, and economic recognition and justice are still
unresolved issues at the national and local levels. There is thus still a long road ahead of us, especially as the UNDRIP begins to be implemented in partnership with Indigenous Peoples. I firmly believe that academia has the moral and political responsibility to accompany this process in solidarity.

This issue of Diálogo, "Indigeneity: Local and Global Crossroads," is in honor and recognition of the histories, struggles, and contributions of Indigenous Peoples from the Americas. It is a recognition of their suffering, resistance, strength, and solidarity that are at the heart of who they are and what they are proposing nowadays as solutions for our current crises. As the name of the journal suggests, this issue has been conceived as another voice in the intercultural dialogue that has to happen, and is happening, between all of those who have dedicated their lives to the protection of human rights and the attainment of justice in the context of an ever-changing pluricultural world. For this reason, my intention was to bring together the voices of indigenous and non-indigenous activists, artists, and academics interested in sharing their experiences and knowledges in a journal committed to the divulgación de saberes. Several crucial themes appear throughout this issue of Diálogo: the empowerment of indigenous women, the experiences of indigenous migrants and their communities, indigenous resistance throughout history and in contemporary times, what it means to be indigenous, indigenous modes of representation and knowledge, indigenous organizing, and academia’s engagement with indigenous issues. Let me give you a preview of what is in each section.

De Nuestra América section contains essays that employ different analytical perspectives to understand indigeneity, indigenous resistance, indigenous migration, and Afromestizo religiosity. Most of the essays are based on the premise that Indigenous Peoples are agents being able to represent themselves using their own voices. Benjamín Alonso Rascón uses a historical perspective to understand the various forms of symbolic Yaqqui resistance in the 18th century. He concludes the essay alluding briefly to how Yaqqui resistance is guarded in collective memory and can come out in daily interactions. Coro J-A Juanena explores how indigenous women have weaved a political global identity and how they are representing themselves to international organizations. She tells us that indigenous women have built a new social collectivity that has transcended a "consciencia en sí" to formulate a "consciencia para sí," from which they can propose decolonization strategies. Based on the responses of indigenous university students, Sara McElmurry explores how they interpret what is and what it means to be indigenous in Oaxaca. She concludes that indigeneity is relational and that it is often associated strongly with discrimination and injustice. Dina Fachin analyzes how the collaborative work between a Zapotec community and video makers in the film Blossoms of Fire results in a deconstruction of mainstream stereotypical images of indigeneity, and in presenting them as “enunciators of their own histories.” Using social class as an important factor, the essay by Alejandro Martínez Canales focuses on the effects of migration on the Nahua culture in the Sierra de Zongolica, Veracruz, Mexico. Finally, Wendy Phillips explores how afromestizo communities in La Costa Chica in Guerrero, Mexico have been able to retain some elements of indigenous African religious systems as a form of resistance. As does the first essay in this set, she suggests that this is because these elements remain in the “collective unconscious” or in the memory of afromestizos and they can surface when appropriate.

Desde el Taller brings together various short pieces based on the personal experiences of indigenous and non-indigenous activists, students, and academics, in their encounter with indigenous and transnational realities. Marco Tavanti and Tomás Ramírez talk about their experiences in Chiapas, Mexico. The first is a committed scholar who has been following the processes at Acteal, a Maya-Tzotzil community that witnessed a massacre in 1997. Given that in 2009 several of the convicted murderers were freed by the Mexican justice system, he claims that “Acteal is an open wound in the Latin American and worldwide indigenous quest for justice;” for this reason, Acteal has been memorialized and linked to other pillars of shame. Tomás Ramírez shares with us his personal experiences in San Cristóbal de las Casas, which have had a powerful effect on him as he reflects upon the reality he was immersed in through an academic program; and he discusses how to help change that reality by creating awareness. He says: “The liberation of indigenous women in San Cristóbal de las Casas is the liberation of all women,” as he realizes that if this is to happen, it would mean that a change in our consciousness would also have happened.

The next two essays capture the experiences of indigenous women in constructing a sense of collective self through close economic, social, political, and cultural relationships in a transnational space that encompasses the communities of origin as well as all of those where indigenous migrants have settled. Rufino Domínguez-Santos narrates how the Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales was established in California in 1991 and how it has worked to defend and promote the rights of indigenous migrants in both Mexico and the USA. He also explains that the Centro Nacional para el Desarrollo Indígena Oaxaquito was created to promote programs and capacity building for the benefit of indigenous communities. Domínguez-Santos explains that developing a cultural consciousness is key for learning from other cultures and to respect each other. Bertha Rodríguez-Santos explains some of those rooted values that indigenous migrants bring with them, and how they organize among themselves to navigate US society and state institutions.

The last two essays reflect on how working collaboratively with indigenous women and their communities has transformed the authors personally. Susana Martínez tells us about her experiences in reconnecting with one of her places of origin, Guatemala, especially as an academic. She tells us about how, upon her return to Chicago, these experiences inspired her to set up a reading group as a space for dialogue, and to collaborate with MayaWorks, a non-profit fair trade organization. Mary Beth Danielson reflects on how she discovers a sense of community in an unexpected place for her: the town cemetery in Xetoxon, Guatemala; and how she perceives the Maya as being “rooted” peoples as she visits a mountain with her family host.

Chispas section brings together three very detailed and descriptive essays on indigenous organizing at different levels. Beginning with the international level, Marc Becker writes about the Fourth Continental Summit of Indigenous Peoples and Nationalities of Abya Yala that took place in Puno, Peru, in 2009 just before the massacre in Bagua. This summit’s slogan “For plurinational states and living well!” reflects the commitment of the internationalized indigenous movement in the Americas to make proposals for the survival of all humanity. Yaatsil Guevara González, in contrast, focuses on indigenous organizing at the local level in the region called Mixe Baja in Oaxaca. She describes how a new political
Culture has emerged in the region that has promoted the constitution of indigenous organizations and the incorporation of political parties. Juan Felipe Guzmán and Carlos Piñeyro Nelson describe the formation of two important social movements in the volatile context of 2006 in Mexico: the Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca and the Asamblea de Artistas Revolucionarios de Oaxaca; and the kinds of alternatives that they propose. Although neither of these are indigenous organizations, indigenous activists have certainly participated consistently in both of them in different ways.

The book reviews should speak for themselves, but I want to acknowledge the generosity of Alma Esther Hernández Martínez in reviewing a very important book on the experiences of indigenous women in Mexico, Colombia and Guatemala by Rosalva Aida Hernández. My contribution is a review of three books that are challenging us to understand in different ways indigenous social movements, indigenity, and interculturality in the context for decolonization. I offer my sincere appreciation of Gunther Dietz and Emilio del Valle Escalante who allowed me to share a small part of their fascinating journey of exploration of these issues; and to the editors of the Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies for an incredibly insightful volume on critical pedagogies, ethics, and indigenous discourses.

Our featured artist, Miki’ala Catalfano is a Native Hawaiian living in California where she participates actively in bringing awareness on indigenous cultural diversity and in promoting their rights at the local, national, and international levels. We are very honored to present her art from the series “Cultural Identity” in this issue of Diálogo, as it brings together many of the important themes discussed here. Through her work and that of others, she reflects on what it means to be indigenous living in two worlds, the loss of Hawaiian sovereignty, living in exile, and what it means to be an indigenous woman. She invites us all to think about our relationships with our ancestors, our lands, Mother Earth, and those places we call “home,” as well as on the stereotypes and romanticization of Native Hawaiians.

With her powerful lesson, and everything else that I have learned from Miki’ala in our international journeys, as well as from my joint paths with other contributors in this issue, I would like to finish this introduction; but not before giving my most profound gratitude to all of them, to all of you who wish to embark in this amazing dialogue with us, and to the Center for Latino Research for inviting me to make it possible.

NOTES
1 The Kuna name for the Americas. The Kuna live within Panamá.

REFERENCE

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About art by MIKI’ALA CATALFANO: A long time ago, before I believed it, I asked a tree when I would be able to go home. “You are home,” the tree told me. Sometimes when I am on the land, I feel the rightness of being. In that way, I am always connected to my home, Hawai’i.