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Indigenous Migrants and Language Barriers in the U.S.

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This reflection is based on my experience as an Indigenous interpreter, an advocate for Indigenous migrants' rights, and my own journey as a monolingual Indigenous migrant in the United States. Our communities face unique challenges, often ignored in the discourses regarding migration from Mexico and Latin American countries.

I come from the community of San Bartolomé Zoogocho in the Northern Highlands of Oaxaca, a Zapotec community whose migration dates back to the Bracero Program. I came to the United States at the age of ten and arrived in the Westlake area of downtown Los Angeles in September 1981. When I arrived, I was monolingual, knowing nothing more than a few Spanish words that I learned in our town's bilingual school. When I enrolled in school, I was put into an English-language class; I understood nothing else except my name. I went on without understanding much of what was going on, somehow making it through my courses. Aside from receiving no support at school, at home my parents spoke no English and their Spanish was limited at best, making it hard for them to be involved in my education. Mine was not an isolated experience; aside from our youths confronting severe challenges in education, our communities have faced challenges in accessing and navigating a number of resources.

I have witnessed other people's struggles through my role as an interpreter and advocate. My role as an interpreter began at fourteen: When a fellow community member was trying to obtain his barber's license, the state exam board did not offer the exam in our language, but allowed me to step in as an interpreter. With my assistance, he was able to pass the test and established a successful business. Since then, I received formal training and I am now a medical and court interpreter. I have seen the crucial need for Indigenous-language interpreters.

Indigenous migrants are at a linguistic disadvantage in courts, schools, hospitals, and the workplace, which often leads to the violation of their rights. When they encounter law enforcement, they are often mistaken as Spanish speakers, and are advised of their rights in

Spanish. A recent case which stresses the impact of language barriers on migrants is that of Cirila Baltazar Cruz,¹ who only speaks *Chatino*. When she gave birth in Pascagoula, Missouri, her social worker, who did not speak Chatino, accused her of trading sex for housing. Cirila's child was removed from her custody, and the court provided her with a Spanish interpreter, despite her limited ability to understand or speak Spanish. When she fought for custody, the foster parents argued that her inability to speak or understand English would cause "developmental problems" for the child, and the judge agreed. I have worked alongside others to educate service providers and law enforcement about the diversity of the Indigenous migrant population, and the need for trained Indigenous-language interpreters. It's been thirty-three years since my arrival, and I still see our communities struggling to navigate the resources and judicial system in this country.²

ENDNOTES

¹ <<http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/case-docket/cruz>>, <<http://thinkprogress.org/justice/2014/03/13/3400651/mississippi-judge-whotook-away-immigrant-mothers-baby-said-lack-of-english-would-cause-developmental-problems/>>.

² The author gives thanks to Octavio Vélez for his help with editing.