¿Eres Indígena?

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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."

This article is available in Diálogo: https://via.library.depaul.edu/dialogo/vol13/iss1/5
I have grown accustomed to getting these kinds of puzzled responses from students in the beginner’s-level English courses I teach at the Universidad Tecnológica de la Mixteca (UTM) in Huajuapan de León, Oaxaca. Some of my students come from tiny, mostly-indigenous communities tucked away in the mountains of this rugged state in southern Mexico and are the first in their families to study anything past high school, if not primary school. University is a new concept for them, as is English class with their US-born profesora.

But in this case, the question I posed to my students had nothing to do with English grammar or vocabulary; instead, the question was of a deeper, even more complex variety: What does it mean to be indigenous? Presented to any university student, questions of identity are difficult to answer. Who, at age 18 or 19, or even at age 25, just finding balance between adolescence and young adulthood, has a clear concept of self? But within the context of Oaxaca - a state where more than 45 percent of the population is indigenous (CDI 2006), a place where people are simultaneously proud of and shamed by their indigenous heritage, a region where people insult each other for being yope, naco, negro or indio - the question of identity, particularly indigenous identity, becomes even more complex.

“Sometimes when we look deep within ourselves, we easily get confused,” Inés, a business science student explained to me, ostensibly apologizing for what she viewed as a flubbed answer to one of my questions. I had invited this student and seven others from diverse communities in Oaxaca to my office to participate in
an interview about indigenous identity, an interview where I explained there would be no “right” or “wrong” answers, just diverse perspectives.

According to the Real Academia Española, the “authority” on the Spanish language, the word indígena is easily defined: “Originario del país de que se trata.” The idea of being originario, or native, to a particular country is echoed in the common use of the word “indigenous” in the United States. We in the US have long used the word to refer to indigenous flora and fauna, but, more recently, as a response to increasingly politically-correct times, have applied the term to people, given that the politically- and emotionally-charged term “Indian” has long since fallen out of vogue. In some regards, the same may hold true in Mexico, where indio is not considered to be a particularly polite thing to call someone. My assumption was that indígena, the counterpart of the English “indigenous”, was also the more politically correct term in Spanish, given that even the government institution assigned to indigenous affairs, the Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas, uses the word as part of its name.

My students quickly corrected my false assumptions: Indígena, at least in Mexico, can be considered extremely offensive. And the reasons why, just as the word itself, are difficult to define.

Given the complex nature of the word, what does it mean in Oaxaca, where the Mexican government refers to nearly half of the population with this “dreaded” name? Does it involve speaking an indigenous language? Dressing a certain way? Following certain customs? Or simply being Oaxacan, or even just Mexican? And how do UTM students - some from remote indigenous villages, some from large cities, most mixing for the first time within the context of a college campus - negotiate the complex idea of identity, particularly indigenous identity?

If identity is a product of background, it becomes necessary to further understand the communities that UTM students call home. There is a temptation to gloss over the multiple cultural, economic, political and geographical factors at work in Oaxaca with a simplistic “it’s complicated,” but this does a disservice to understanding students’ perspectives. A brief overview of the Oaxacan context, along with the UTM’s place within that context is provided below, and a discussion of the definition of the word “indigenous” as an aspect of students’ identities. Throughout the paper, I will offer vignettes of the students themselves in an effort to portray the many diverse ways that local students are connecting with their indigenous (or, in some cases, non-indigenous) identities in Oaxaca. As a conclusion, I will offer a look at perhaps what best unites these diverse students: the future.

OAXACAN DICHOTOMIES

For those unaccustomed with Oaxaca, suffice to say it is a land of contrasts. What it enjoys in cultural wealth - one-third of the state’s population speak at least one of 14 indigenous languages allowing them to develop their own customs, languages and cultures. And these groups continue to live in relative isolation, which has allowed their unique traditions to survive through the colonial era and to the present day. Oaxaca’s mountains were home to Benito Juarez, Mexico’s first fully indigenous - and, arguably, most beloved - president, and continue to produce a cultural heritage that is celebrated in events such as Oaxaca City’s Guelaguetza, which features dances from various Oaxacan communities.

However, these same mountains contribute to the region’s marginalization. Many of Oaxaca’s rural communities are not only isolated from each other, but also from the rest of the state and the country. The poor state of - or complete absence of - quality roads and reliable transportation in many remote communities means that many UTM students face 12- to 15-hour commutes when they wish to return home during university vacations. Nearly 800,000 Oaxacan households do not have basic electric, water and sewage removal services (CDI 2005), and many pueblos lack access to reliable telephone or postal services, meaning that they are “cut off” from contact with the rest of the country.

Within these already-marginalized communities, Oaxaca’s indigenous populations are among the hardest-hit: A full 65 percent of the state’s illiterate population is indigenous and only 8 percent of indigenous Oaxacans have finished secondary school. Less than 20 percent of indigenous households have electricity and 10 percent of indigenous homes still have dirt floors (CDI 2005). The extreme poverty found in Oaxaca’s indigenous communities is often extrapolated to stereotype the poor throughout the state and even the country, meaning that many economically disenfranchised Mexicans - whether they consider themselves indigenous or not - are often scorned for “living like indios,” and are seen as “backwards,” “ignorant,” or “uneducated” by people in more developed or urban areas.

Contrasting the marginalization of many of Oaxaca’s rural communities with Oaxaca City, the state’s robust, Spanish-speaking capital, a UNESCO World Heritage Site easily accessed via superhighway from Mexico City and other urban areas, the state’s disparities become obvious: Indigenous people live in the marginalized country, and everyone else lives in the city. This idea may seem simplistic, the conclusion of an outsider, but it is readily reflected in the perspective of a UTM student from an urban area:
I don't consider myself indigenous, because I think that to be indigenous, you probably live in a community that is extremely marginalized, that probably doesn't have highways, or drinkable water - the basics - light, so I think that this is what makes a person indigenous, and I don't see myself that way.

As we shall see, other UTM students' definition of "indigenous" goes deeper than the idea of coming from a rural or a marginalized community, but the economic realities of many of Oaxaca's pueblos mean that "poor" "marginalized" and "uneducated" are often synonymous with "indigenous."

**LA MIXTECA**

To reference *La Mixteca* is to at once refer to a geographic, economic, cultural and political phenomenon. Spanning the Mexican states of Guerrero, Puebla and Oaxaca, "The Mixtec Region" seems to bridge the dichotomies that plague the rest of Oaxaca. It is at once indigenous and urban, rural and accessible: Named for the Mixtec people that continue to make up 88 percent of the area's indigenous community (which comprises 58 percent of the regional population, according to the CDI, 2006), it is now home to several urban areas, including Huajuapan de León, a city of about 80,000. It lies within three hours of both Oaxaca City and Puebla City, and offers fairly easy access to both.

**¿QUÉN ERES?**

**LILIANA MARTÍNEZ SANTIAGO**
**HOMETOWN: SAN BALTAZAR CHICHICAPAM, OAXACA**
**MAJOR: APPLIED MATHEMATICS**
**FIRST LANGUAGES: ZAPOTEC AND SPANISH**

*Soy estudiante de la UTM, soy de San Baltazar Chichicapam, soy muy buena amiga, mexicana, oaxaqueña, zapoteca. Para mi (ser indígena) es algo bueno, no soy cualquiera. Digo a mis amigos que hablo zapoteca, ¡sí! si no me creen! Siempre he estado muy segura de mí. ¡Era más como sí yo hablo y tú no!*

The Universidad Tecnológica de la Mixteca, located in Huajuapan de León, is so closely linked with *La Mixteca* that it adopted the region's name as its own. The university's founding in the region was far from coincidental; rather, it works to improve economic, cultural and political realities of the area. The UTM is part of the Oaxacan System of State Universities (SUNEO), which operates 10 universities throughout the state of Oaxaca, mostly in small cities and rural communities, with a developmental mission to "transform Oaxacan society from its low socio-economic standing into an educated, skilled, creative, productive, prosperous and proud 21st century community with economic opportunities for all people."

**INÉS HERNÁNDEZ TRUJILLO**
**HOMETOWN: HUAJUAPAN DE LÉON, OAXACA**
**MAJOR: BUSINESS SCIENCE**
**FIRST LANGUAGE: SPANISH**

*Soy alumna, soy mexicana, y soy mixteca. Lo admiro (a Benito Juárez) porque en los libros dice que el si fue indígena, una persona de escasos recursos, vivía en un lugar feo y, sin embargo, a pesar de todas estas limitaciones, salió adelante y llegó a ser presidente de la república; y mi admiración es porque cómo teniendo tantas limitaciones y valorando a sí mismo, salió adelante.*

The UTM brought this mission to Huajuapan de León in 1990, and now has grown to offer five-year degree programs in nine areas, including computer, electronic and mechatronic engineering as well as business administration. The establishment of UTM in Huajuapan de León meant that rural Oaxacans would no longer have to stray far from their pueblos to receive a quality education, and the provision of generous, full-tuition scholarships meant that even the region's most economically challenged could afford to go to university. As a result, many of the UTM's 1,500 students come from small communities within the state of Oaxaca, with approximately 10 percent of students self-identifying as "indigenous.‖ However, because of the university's solid academic reputation, students also come from urban areas, including Oaxaca City, Puebla City, and even Mexico City, to study. The result is a diverse group of students on UTM campus, a mix of people from some of Mexico's most remote, marginalized communities studying alongside others from the country's most urban, wealthy cities. And this mix has fascinating implications for the concept of identity.

**THE SEMANTICS OF INDIGENOUS**

In very broad terms, Oaxaca has what might be generalized as a love/hate relationship with its indigenous roots. Despite the state's public pride in its indigenous heritage - as evidenced through the countless schools, parks and boulevards named after Benito Juárez, the colorful indigenous handicrafts for sale in Oaxaca City's markets, and the huge popularity of cultural events such as Guelaguetza - indigenous people still report day-to-day discrimination from their non-indigenous neighbors. Indeed, the word "indigenous" is widely seen as something negative, something
seen as “primitive,” according to a computer engineering student, or “low class,” according to a business science student.

Even students who self-identified as indigenous take issue with the term. “The word ‘indigenous’ sounds fuera de rango,” Flavia, Mixe-speaking applied mathematics student explained to me. “It’s better to say that you’re from an ethnic group or that you speak a ‘mother tongue.’” Armando, a Zapotec-speaking student, disputes the correctness of the term:

The word ‘indigenous’ is misused. History tells us that when Christopher Columbus (and his men) arrived here, they actually wanted to arrive in India. So when they arrived here, they got confused, and the first thing they saw were ‘indigenous’ (people), so from there we got the word ‘Indian’ and later, ‘indigenous’.

Applying the Real Academia Española’s idea of “indigenous” as being synonymous with “native” or “original” to a place, it could be argued that all almost all Mexicans are “indigenous” to the Americas, for the simple fact that many carry a mix of Spanish and “native” blood, or simply because they were born here. A UTM student from an urban community seemed to take offense at my suggestion that he might consider himself “indigenous” to Mexico because of his background, explaining that he, as a Mexican, identified more with the idea of being mestizo.

No (having indigenous blood does not mean that all Mexicans are indigenous). This simply means that they have blood from indigenous people but they are not indigenous, because this would also mean that they are also Spanish, English and everything else, but really, they are just mestizos.

However, the term “indigenous” does not carry negative overtones for everyone. Araceli, a Triqui-speaking business science student, speaking on behalf of her entire community, says “we feel proud to be indigenous.” And for Liliana, a Zapotec-speaking applied mathematics major, “for me,
While their perspectives were diverse, for the eight students I interviewed, "being indigenous" has something to do with culture, dress, traditions, geography and language. The latter - language - is particularly useful in offering a straightforward definition of the term, as it is easy to classify people based on their first language. Therefore, it seems plausible to equate "being indigenous" with the idea of speaking an indigenous language as a first language (and, thus, having learned Spanish as a second language either from bilingual family members or, more formally, in school). The Mexican government's offering of scholarships to "indigenous" students based on command of an indigenous language seems to support this linguistics-based definition. Furthermore, the use of language to classify indigenous people allows for simple contrast with mono-lingual Spanish speakers, who are largely unlikely to classify themselves as "indigenous."

**INDIGENOUS AS LANGUAGE**

While their perspectives were diverse, for the eight students I interviewed, “being indigenous” has something to do with culture, dress, traditions, geography and language. The latter - language - is particularly useful in offering a straightforward definition of the term, as it is easy to classify people based on their first language. Therefore, it seems plausible to equate “being indigenous” with the idea of speaking an indigenous language as a first language (and, thus, having learned Spanish as a second language either from bilingual family members or, more formally, in school). The Mexican government’s offering of scholarships to “indigenous” students based on command of an indigenous language seems to support this linguistics-based definition. Furthermore, the use of language to classify indigenous people allows for simple contrast with mono-lingual Spanish speakers, who are largely unlikely to classify themselves as “indigenous.”

In offering this definition, however, I immediately recognize its flaw: Two of the students I interviewed described themselves as “indigenous,” but when asked later about their command of an indigenous language, explained that they “understand but don’t speak” their parents’ mother tongue. Christian, a computer engineering major whose first language is Spanish, identifies himself as indigenous “for being Mexican,” and cites his “love for the Mixtec culture” and Zapotec roots through his father, who is a Zapotec speaker. Christian has studied Mixtec since childhood and “doesn’t know how to speak it but can understand it, even though it’s difficult.” Liliana, the applied mathematics major quoted earlier, later explained to me that when her family speaks to her in Zapotec, she usually replies in Spanish: “I can speak it, but I don’t use it very often.” This is not surprising as her family left their pueblo and moved to Oaxaca City just after she was born.

Are Christian and Liliana any less “indigenous” than their Zapotec- or Mixtec-speaking counterparts? Armando, the oldest of five children, was raised by his Zapotec-speaking grandparents in a small, predominately-Zapotec-speaking pueblo, and considers Zapotec his first - and strongest - language. His younger siblings, in contrast, were raised by his mother in Oaxaca City. Like Christian and Liliana, none of Armando’s brothers and sisters speaks their family’s indigenous language, though all claim to understand it. While Armando thinks of himself indigenous, the linguistic differences between him and his siblings mean that “I can’t consider my siblings that way, because they are a mix. They have indigenous roots, but I can’t define them as indigenous.”

Such linguistic differences often come to a head in culturally-mixed settings such as urban classrooms. As many rural, indigenous communities have only primary schools, secondary school-age students may have to leave their pueblos to study. Relocation often means leaving a place where an indigenous language is widely or even exclusively spoken to live in a Spanish-speaking environment. For indigenous-speaking students, having learned Spanish as a
second language or not having learned it at all, the transition to a Spanish-only classroom can be daunting, and can lead to merciless teasing from peers. Indeed, Armando described to me his challenges in adjusting to secondary school in Oaxaca City after he had gone through elementary school in his Zapotec-speaking village:

It was very difficult for me to leave primary school and go to secondary school because I spent all of my childhood speaking Zapotec, and when I got to secondary school all of the classes were in Spanish, and I didn’t understand very well....there was a period of my life where (my classmates) made fun of me; ‘why can’t you speak Spanish?’ ‘Why are you so tongue-tied?’ They called me yope, which is a very aggressive word. It is a synonym of the word ‘indigenous’ but is more vulgar. When they call you ‘yope’ it means that you are ignorant, that you are backwards, don’t know what you are talking about. This word hurts (even) more than the word ‘indigenous.’

If “being indigenous” involves social stigma, then so does speaking an indigenous language. Indeed, the way that indigenous languages themselves are esteemed is telling. Indigenous languages such as Zapotec, Mixtec, Triqui or Mixe - spoken in Mexico long before the arrival of the Spaniards - are commonly referred to as dialects, or “dialects.” My training as a language teacher tells me that dialects are merely varieties of larger languages, spoken by a subgroup of a language’s speakers and usually based on regional differences (e.g the dialects of Caribbean English or Boston-area English). In contrast, Mixe, for example, is a unique language of its own, not a regional or geographical dialect of a larger or more “standard” form of the language. However, dialect has become so synonymous with “indigenous language” that people have stopped questioning the origin of the term or even its correctness. Indeed, even some of the students I interviewed referred to their own mother tongues as dialects. Offering the assumption that the word dialect is a way to compare an indigenous language to the more widely-spoken Spanish language, referring to it as such indicates that it is an “inferior” or “subordinate” way of speaking a “standard” language.

My experience in recruiting students to participate in this project - pitched as an article on “indigenous identities” - was telling of the stigmas associated with both being indigenous and speaking an indigenous language. No sooner did I mention the word “indigenous” than my usually-respectful students started giggling or whispering to each other. While some students did raise their hands and proudly volunteer to participate, others waited until after class to “admit” to...
being interested in participating in the project, usually explaining that their interest was related to the fact that they spoke a dialect. Other students with no ostensible connection to indigenous culture also volunteered to participate. One such student, Victor, a computer engineering student from Oaxaca City, offers explanation for his fellow UTM students' behavior:

I suppose that they were embarrassed, because when you told them about the topic, they thought that you were calling them indigenous, and they found that offensive because of the fact that their (indigenous people's) way of dressing and their form of speaking is seen as being primitive. So it was embarrassing to them (the students). I don't see it that way, I see it as a great history, but unfortunately they don't.

Indeed, the word “indigenous” - along with the languages associated with it - is so emotionally charged that even its mere mention in a neutral context by a foreign-born teacher evokes reaction.

**INDIGENOUS AS GEOGRAPHY**

Six of the eight students I interviewed self-identified as “indigenous,” and, when asked further about why they had chosen to define themselves as such, many explained that they were “indigenous” because they had been born in a specific pueblo. Does the definition of the word “indigenous” lie somewhere in a person’s geography?

According to Armando, who spent his childhood in a community called Candelaria Loxicha, “I am indigenous, and people are considered indigenous because they belong to a community where an indigenous language is spoken.”

Taking Armando’s definition a step further, several students defined themselves in terms of a specific pueblo. For example, when I asked Liliana to complete the sentence “I am…” she replied, “I am a UTM student, I am from San Baltazar Chichicapam, I am a good friend, I am Mexican, I am Oaxacan and I am Zapotec.” The order of Liliana’s responses indicates that she identifies closely with her community - more closely than with her country, state, or even ethnic group. However, Liliana’s response is even more telling when one considers she has never actually lived in San Baltazar Chichicapam: She is registered as having been born there, but has lived in Oaxaca City her entire life.

Flavia’s response echo’s Liliana’s: “I am a student, I’m Mexican, I’m from Oaxaca, from a pueblo that is characterized by many things, for example, the Mixe language.” Liliana Soledad, a computer engineering major, also identifies closely with her community: “I consider myself indigenous because in San Pedro Amuzgos (the pueblo she is from), there is culture, there are handicrafts, (and) there are customs that are unique to the region.”

Christian and Inés, students who both speak Spanish as a first language, considered themselves to be “Mixtec” for being from Huajuapan de León in the Mixtec region of Oaxaca. Christian, a regular participant in Oaxaca’s Guelaguetza, identified closely with the Mixtec region’s cultural and ethnic aspects of the area: “Here in Huajuapan there is a lot of culture, even though the Spanish arrived here, (indigenous) roots are still strong here.” However, Inés’ motivations for calling herself “Mixteca” were simply geographical: “We belong to a certain region, and it identifies you. Probably you can say, ‘you’re Mexican, you’re Oaxacan,’ but if you say that you’re Mixtec, it identifies you as being from a certain region.”

Inés studied in Toluca, an urban area near Mexico City, for several years before returning to her hometown to enroll at UTM. While Inés does not consider herself to be indigenous, her peers in Mexico City thought otherwise:

Because of the fact that I’m from Oaxaca, (people in Toluca) considered me to be indigenous. That’s what they thought. Probably at some point they had been to a marginalized community (in Oaxaca), and they think all of Oaxaca is that way....When I arrived and when she (Inés’ Tolucan friend) introduced me there, she would say with a lot of pride that I was Oaxacan, that I was Mixtec, but they didn’t accept me like she accepted me. They start to jump to conclusions before they meet you. (They assume) that you’re from a certain place, so you’re a certain way. The experience was hard, because you suddenly feel like an outsider, you don’t feel wanted.

Reacting to being judged in Toluca, Inés explained that her attitude was “bad,” “not because I was offended, but because I felt defensive”:

When you live in other places, being indigenous isn’t seen as something to be proud of; instead, it is seen as something bad, it means being classified as lower class, coming from limited resources, so my first reaction was bad. I was annoyed, I was angry. I told them that they were probably more ‘indigenous’ than me because they dressed a certain way, I defended myself, I told them that I probably can dress better than you. (Looking back I realize that) probably was not the correct way to react, but it was an expression of my anger. I told them, ‘I probably have more money than you,’ and that ‘I am much better educated than you because I don’t go around criticizing other people.’ It was hard because I couldn’t have good conversations or develop good friendships because they judged me before they knew me.

The Tolucans’ judgement of Inés based on where she came from - and Inés’ subsequent reaction to being called ‘indigenous’ - is telling of the complex social and emotional weight of the word. It is also telling of how closely indigenous identity - rightly or wrongly - is tied to where a person comes from.

**INDIGENOUS AS DIFFERENCE**

If “indigenous” is difficult to define on its own terms, perhaps it is best described by contrasting it with something else. Most students - those who had described themselves as “indigenous” and “non-indigenous” alike - were acutely aware of the differences between themselves and the other group. Victor, for example, described “being indigenous” in terms of language spoken, traditions, way of dressing and beliefs, and then contrasted this with his own identity: “I am sure that I do not believe in the things that indigenous people believe in...so we are not the same, we aren’t the same in this aspect.”

For the Amuzqueña Liliana Soledad, the difference lies in a person’s way of appreciating handicrafts and music: “For a person who is not indigenous, they can just appreciate it (superficially), they like it because it looks pretty, or because it sounds nice, but it doesn’t have any other meaning for them...(but) for a person who is indigenous, some people know what it means.”

In a society where indigenous people are often shunned for what they have not “adopted” - for example, the use of the Spanish
language or “modern” customs or dress - Araceli defines herself in terms of what she has not lost:

The others have lost their traditions, while we continue to follow ours. Because here (in Huajuapan de León) it is big, it is considered a city, and, on the other hand, our town is more like a community. There aren’t many people, so that’s why we are able to conserve our traditions. Here, no, it has grown too much. And now they speak Spanish and have lost the traditions of their ancestors.

Other students, however, seemed almost puzzled by my request to describe the differences between themselves and others. Flavia, for example, was so firmly rooted in her identity as Mixe that she almost could not consider another way of being. After all, before the arrival of the Spanish, there was no need to classify people as “indigenous” or not: “According to my pueblo we were never conquered (by the Spanish), perhaps because we are in the mountains, so people can’t enter there as easily as they can in the valleys.”

When I asked Liliana, who grew up in Oaxaca City but has made regular visits back to San Baltazar Chichicapam to visit family, to explain the differences between indigenous and non-indigenous people, her answer was simple: “With culture, yes, there is a difference, but with other things, there aren’t differences.”

¿QUÉN ERES?

LILIANA SOLEDAD SANTIAGO LÓPEZ
HOMETOWN: SAN PEDRO AMUZGOS, PUTLA, OAXACA
MAJOR: COMPUTER ENGINEERING
FIRST LANGUAGE: AMUZGO

Soy costeña, soy indígena, soy armazqueña. Mi mamá lleva más de treinta años viviendo en la ciudad de Oaxaca, sin embargo ella sigue hablando como armazqueña, sigue las tradiciones armazqueñas. Entonces yo creo lo importante es el conocimiento que tengas como indígena a pesar de que pasen muchos años puedes estar en México, puedes estar en Europa o en Estados Unidos, y lo que sigue manteniendo es importante para que te reconozcan como indígena en cualquier lugar donde estés.

MOVING FORWARD

Liliana’s conclusion that there are more similarities than differences between her fellow students - indigenous and non-indigenous alike - holds especially true when they are asked about the future. Students’ goals mirror the UTM’s developmental mission: While urban and rural communities squabble over which is more disadvantaged, the fact remains that Oaxaca as a whole remains economically marginalized. UTM students are ready to roll up their sleeves and work to change that reality.

“My idea is that there could be industry in Huajuapan to create jobs for those who don’t have work,” Inés explained. “I’m just starting, so I don’t have a (firm) idea, but...we should try to move forward. This is the way to create jobs and benefit the community.”

Though their communities are seen as “marginalized” or “backwards,” by outsiders, students who had self-identified as “indigenous” expressed a strong feeling of responsibility to return to where they came from: “One day I will have to go back to my pueblo, that’s where my ombligo is, that’s where I belong,” said Armando, whose goal is to return to his community and work in municipal government. His plans to be different than other politicians: “I want to work for the benefit of my community. For many people right now, being a politician means that you waste money, right? There are personal interests and there is a stinginess that doesn’t have anything to do with me. I know my people, I know about their needs, their traditions and their customs, I identify with them, and I really know what has happened to them.”

Just as Armando is confident that his indigenous roots will help him succeed in politics, Flavia thinks that they will make her a better teacher. She plans to return to Santo Domingo Tepoztepec to teach math, and “because I am from there, my students will trust me. There won’t always be a need to depend on people from the outside.”

Araceli, who arrived to our interview dressed in a traditional Triqui huipil that she had made herself, also plans to return to her community after she finishes her business degree: “I want to build my own business, making my traditional dresses and selling them in other communities and other cities. It will be in my pueblo, because that’s where the people are who know how to make them, and we’ll export them to other states and other countries. It will be a way to conserve our culture.”

CONCLUSIONS

If the goal of this project was to accurately define the term “indigenous,” then I have failed. But I knew that failure would be a likely outcome even before hitting the “record” button at the start of my first student interview: While the Real Academia Española may offer a simple definition of indígena from up in academia’s ivory towers, its actual use in society - from down in the proverbial trenches of one of the most economically disenfranchised parts of the globe - is much more complex.

It is human nature to want keep up with - if not to outdo - one’s neighbor. Even if only linguistically, in a place where the “have-nots” significantly outnumber the “haves,” the easiest way to disparage someone else is with a word that packs a three-way linguistic punch. More than simply defining someone who is simply “native” to a place, indígena speaks to the discouraging economic, cultural and political realities of the communities that many such people call home. And so long as such gloomy realities of these places remain the same, so will the negative associations with a word that should be a source of cultural pride.

While their individual experiences are indicative of the frustrations of many of Oaxacans, UTM students’ overall perspective is hopeful.
They are aware of the value of their - and others’ - indigenous roots and overwhelmingly see "being indigenous" as a source of pride, something that ties them together as Oaxacans. They seem to be aware that the negative connotations of being "indigenous" are linked to the negative aspects of their day-to-day realities - the economic, political and cultural injustices that have plagued their pueblos for generations - and are determined to apply their passion, talent and education to improving their communities.

My sincere thanks go to Liliana Soledad, Christian, Armando, Liliana, Victor, Flavia, Inés, Araceli (and her sister, Esmeralda) for sharing their perspectives, their frustrations and their aspirations with me. It is my hope that their dreams for the future will become realities, and their children and grandchildren - future generations of Mixtecos, Zapotecos, Amuzqueños, Triquis, Mixes and, above all, Oaxaqueños - will be able to speak of their shared indigenous roots with their heads - and hands - held high.

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PHOTOS taken by Sara McElmurry.