

Recently Arrived Maya Migrant Youth's Racialized and Languaged Experiences

David W. Barillas Chón, PhD (Western University)
dwbari@gmail.com

Ladinos (i.e., *mestizos*) in Guatemala and *Latines*¹ in the United States put down, make fun of, and pick on Maya youth by calling them the racist epithet *indio*. In Guatemala and other parts of Abiyala (Latin America), *indio* serves as a racist moniker to signify inferiority. For some Maya youth, being called *indio* has no negative effect on them as they are proud of their indigeneity; for others, *indio* is a word used to shame. A root source of ladino discrimination of Maya youth is the racialized and languaged² colonial logics imposed by colonizers in Guatemala and other parts of Abiyala (Flores and Rosa 2015). These colonial logics travel with migrants into the U.S.

In this paper, I provide a brief outline of the racialized and languaged experiences of recently arrived Maya youth from Guatemala in the U.S. This paper is based on my previous research from 2015 to 2016 of eight recently arrived Maya youth from Guatemala (five K'iche', one Mam) and two self-identified Indigenous youth from Mexico, aged fifteen to twenty years, in a high school in the U.S. Pacific Northwest. This study asked how recently arrived Indigenous youth understand indigeneity in their contexts of origin and reception. Primary data consisted of interviews conducted in Spanish and informal conversations with the Indigenous youth.³

My research stems from my own experience as a Maya in the diaspora and my interest in relationships between Indigenous migratory movements and how Indigenous youth cope with racialized and languaged treatments in contexts of origins and the U.S. These are pressing issues that the interdisciplinary scholarship investigating childhood and adolescence in the U.S. must contend with to expand these areas of study.

Racialized and Languaged Experiences: U.S. Contexts

Currently, scholars in Latine studies and education studies are producing cutting-edge scholarship that documents how Latine youth discriminate against Indigenous migrant youth from Guatemala and Mexico based on race and language. In my research (Barillas Chón 2019), Joaquín, a K'iche' youth, recounted how a Mexican coworker called his Guatemalan coworkers "*indio*." Asked whether he thought this was an insult or something negative, Joaquín responded, "*no de [sic] algo bueno*" or "not something good." I have written elsewhere (Barillas Chón 2010) how Mexican-descent youth use "*oaxaquita*," also a similar racist epithet to *indio*, towards Indigenous Oaxacan youth, contributing to unwelcome and hostile environments.

Latine studies scholars have also expanded the analytics used to interpret the lived experiences of Indigenous youth.⁴ Critical Latinx Indigeneities (CLI) (Blackwell, Boj Lopez, and Urrieta 2017) is one of the analytics that emerged in Latine studies to understand how indigeneity is reformulated in migrations and as Indigenous Peoples are impacted by and respond to

overlapping colonial contexts (Calderón and Urrieta 2019; Saldaña-Portillo 2017). I use CLI in my research (Barillas Chón 2019, 2022) to note that the racism and dehumanization Maya youth experience in the U.S. is a transnational continuation of longstanding discrimination against Indigenous Peoples across Abiyala.

Experiences in Guatemala

Understanding the treatment that Maya youth receive from ladino Guatemalan migrants and Latine students requires situating their experiences with racism and language discrimination in Guatemala. The following statement from Weas, a K'iche' youth in my research (Barillas Chón 2019), succinctly denotes the Guatemalan government's and ladinos' treatment of Maya Peoples: "Some [K'iche' speakers] were found dead in the streets and they [Guatemalan government] don't do nothing. They [government] don't do nothing because they [people in his community] only speak K'iche'. The government helps more those that speak Spanish" (34). Tonio, another K'iche' youth in the same study, shared a similar sentiment: "In Guatemala, some people have told me... *dialecto* is only used in your town with those that understand it. On the other hand, Spanish is utilized in ...other places. Well then, 'don't use it [*dialecto*]. Focus more on Spanish" (27).

Maya youth adapt to a racialized and languaged social order by learning Spanish, notwithstanding Guatemala's institutionalized neglect and impoverishment of Maya Peoples through the systemic underfunding and under-resourcing of education and health sectors in largely Indigenous rural areas of the country. Maya Peoples, despite their efforts, in many cases do not speak Spanish like monolingual Spanish speakers. Ladinos then perceive Maya Peoples as inferior because of their accents or difficulties speaking Spanish, making them fodder for being made fun of, put down, and denied jobs and economic opportunities.

Transnational Discrimination

Maya youth continue to experience discrimination from ladino migrants because the latter bring their ways of thinking into the U.S. Racist epithets and perceptions related to language regarding Maya Peoples' inferiority travel with them. Maya youth rely on their previous racial schema to map themselves onto new contexts of reception. Previous racial schema now interacts in formidable ways with other racialization processes already present in the U.S. regarding Latines (Hooker 2014). I and other colleagues untangle and make sense of these processes in other papers (Barillas Chón, Montes, and Landeros 2021; Barillas Chón 2022).

In this essay, I provided a brief outline of the discrimination recently arrived Maya migrant youth experience from migrant ladinos and Latines in the U.S. Maya youth and other Indigenous migrants, however, are not exclusively victims. For instance, Oaxacan-descent students and parents have campaigned (Werman 2012) to make the use of *oaxaquita* and *indio* illegal within and beyond schools in Oxnard, California. This campaign is an important intervention in the racism that Indigenous migrants experience. Because this racism is transnational and persistent, larger and collaborative campaigns are needed in Guatemala and in the U.S. to address it. Within the U.S. interdisciplinary scholarship investigating childhood and adolescence, our work must 1) address Indigenous youth from Abiyala and their racialized and languaged experiences, and 2)

employ analytics that take into consideration how racialized and languaged ideologies are imported into the U.S. within migrants.

Author's Note

An earlier version of this paper first appeared in Youth Circulations (<http://www.youthcirculations.com/blog>) published April 5, 2021 under the title "Maya migrant youths' experiences with Latinx students in schools."

Endnotes

¹ Latine is a gender-inclusive term that includes people born in Abiyala and in the U.S. who are racialized as Hispanic/Latino.

² The term “languaged” denotes an active process of Indigenous subject formations through discursive practices based on the idea of race and indigeneity linked to Indigenous languages and Spanish (Flores 2016).

³ Pseudonyms are used to protect participants’ anonymity.

⁴ For a more detailed discussion of CLI and this research, see the special issue of *Latino Studies* (2017) and the *Association of Mexican American Educators Journal* (2019)

References

- Barillas Chón, David W. 2010. “Oaxaqueño/a Students’ (Un)Welcoming High School Experiences.” *Journal of Latinos and Education* 9 (4): 303-320. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15348431.2010.491043>
- Barillas Chón, David W. 2019. “Indigenous Immigrant Youth’s Understanding of Power: Race, Labor, and Language.” *Association of Mexican American Educators Journal* 13(2): 15-41. <http://dx.doi.org/10.24974/amae.13.2.427>
- Barillas Chón, David W. 2022. “K’iche’, Mam, and Nahua Migrant Youth Navigating Colonial Codes of Power.” *Urban Education*, 1-28. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00420859211073902>
- Barillas Chón, David W., Pablo D. Montes, and Judith Landeros. 2021. “Presencing While Absent: Indigenous Latinxs and Education.” In *Handbook of Latinos and Education: Theory, Research, and Practice (2nd ed)*, edited by Enrique G. Murillo et al., 135-145. New York: Taylor & Francis Group.
- Blackwell, Maylei, Floridalma Boj Lopez, and Luis Urrieta Jr. 2017. “Critical Latinx Indigeneities.” *Latino Studies* 15(2): 126-137. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41276-017-0064-0>

- Calderón, Dolores, and Luis Urrieta Jr. 2019. "Studying in Relation: Critical Latinx Indigeneities and Education." *Equity & Excellence in Education* 52(2–3): 219-238. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2019.1672591>
- Flores, Nelson. 2016. "Bilingual Education." In *The Oxford Handbook of Language and Society*, edited by Ofelia García, Nelson Flores, and Massimiliano Spotti, 525-543. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Flores, Nelson, and Jonathan Rosa. 2015. "Undoing Appropriateness: Raciolinguistic Ideologies and Language Diversity in Education." *Harvard Education Review* 85 (2): 149-171. <https://doi.org/10.17763/0017-8055.85.2.149>
- Hooker, Juliet. 2014. "Hybrid Subjectivities, Latin American Mestizaje, and Latino Political Thought on Race." *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 2 (2): 188-201. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2014.904798>
- López, Josúe, and Irizarry, Jason G. 2016. "Somos Pero No Somos Iguales/We Are But We Are Not The Same: Unpacking Latinx Indigeneity and The Implications For Urban Schools." *Urban Education* 00 (0): 1-26. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085919835292>
- Saldaña-Portillo, María J. 2017. "Critical Latinx Indigeneities: A Paradigm Drift." *Latino Studies* 15(2): 138-155. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41276-017-0059-x>
- Werman, Marco. "Oxnard Group Trying to Make 'Oaxaquita' Epithet Illegal." *The World*, May 31, 2012. <https://theworld.org/stories/2012-05-31/oxnard-group-trying-make-oaxaquita-epithet-illegal>

Author contact: David W. Barillas Chón, PhD (Western University), dwbari@gmail.com

To cite this article: Barillas Chón, David W. 2022. "Recently Arrived Maya Migrant Youth's Racialized and Languaged Experiences." *NEOS* 14 (1).

To link to this article: <https://acyig.americananthro.org/neosvol14iss1sp22/barillaschon/>