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Espiraes/Spirals

I was recently asked by the university where I am currently a postdoctoral fellow why I do the work that I do. Why focus on Indigenous youth from Latin America? I responded by saying that part of my work is about healing from intergenerational trauma caused by colonialism and one of its byproducts: racism within Latin America and between Latinxs¹. Here I borrow from Brave Heart's (2000) work to speak of intergenerational trauma as a "constellation of features associated with massive group trauma across generations" (p. 245). Therefore, this healing is both individual and collective. At the individual level, I am healing from colonialism that continues to be manifested in everyday practices that as Maldonado-Torres (2007) articulates we all participate in. Because colonialism affects us all, healing from it is intergenerational. In other words, healing is about building and sustaining healthy relationships with one self, with others, and with the lands we live on. Wilson (2008) reminds us that it is these relationships that are foundational to what it means to be Indigenous. In the work of building and sustaining these relationships, Grande, San Pedro, and Windchief (2015) recommend engaging in "Dialogic Spirals" in which participants in dialogue learn with each other by contributing to the "co-construction of social relations from shared ideas and stories...[asking from the participants] to take risks, to be vulnerable, and to develop trust and understanding. It is this new level of mutuality that spirals the relationship[s] forward and upward" (p. 113). Building from the concept of "Dialogic Spirals," I will share my *historia* or history with you, *mijo*² (my-son) with the intention that by sharing it, you and other children of Indigenous immigrants can learn from it and, along with me, engage in collective healing.

"Autohistorias"/Autohistories.

I want you to know that we come from people with deep and luscious oral and written histories. Not only did they engrave their stories in ceremonial, vivid, and meticulous books (Mignolo, 1995), but they also told them to their children so that they could in turn tell them to their children. And their grandchildren to their children, in perpetuity. We tell our *historias*, among other reasons, in order to mark our existence when others attempt to erase them. In many ways, *mijo*, these *historias* are about writing ourselves into history (Koshy, 2006; Saldivar-Hull, 1999). In other words, borrowing from Anzaldúa (2005), we share these histories in order to preserve and

¹ "Latinx" is used here as a gender inclusive term. Additionally, I make a distinction between Latin Americans and Latinxs because they signal to different racialized groups with different settler-colonial and coloniality histories. While there are overlaps between Latin Americans, who become Latinxs in the U.S., not all Latinxs are Latin Americans. This distinction is important to remember because some Latin Americans in the U.S. maintain strong connections to their regions of origin, maintaining a Latin American identity.

² In this essay I use "*mijo*" and "*hijo*", meaning son, interchangeably.

write ourselves into existence (p. 84). It is through these *historias* that we also share about our survival and perseverance (Vizenor, 2008). For Indigenous people, like myself, these stories are projects of “remembrance” and “reclamation” of our indigeneity (Grande et al, 2015). Our knowledge and theory making persist because they are remembered collectively and passed down through stories (Barndhart, 2005; Grande et al, 2015). In telling these *historias*, we engage in reclamations of our indigeneity that “(re)connect [us]...to space, place, and philosophy” (Grande et al, 2015). For these reasons they are “*autohistorias*” (Anzaldúa, 1999), as they are from us, about us in order to theorize for ourselves and in doing so heal from intergenerational trauma (see, e.g., Pitts, 2016 and Vega, 2018).

Unlike other *historias* that tell a linear account of history, paralleling a colonialist view of knowledge (Deloria, 2004; Smith, 1999), ours are spirals overlapping with each successive generation, dialogically moving from many centers, forward and backward, upward and downward. This is my *autohistoria*, and it’s partially yours as well. My *historia* is also partial. Fragmented. I will tell what I can. There is much more that I will not tell.

Una Espiral/One Spiral.

There is much agency to my past, present, and future *historias*. *Mijo*, there is much to yours as well. I want to start by sharing about my present academic life so that you can see some “roadmaps” (Brayboy, 2005) for a possible future. Keep in mind that present and future roadmaps are also anchored in past histories of survival (Vizenor, 2008). This journey to academia started years ago in Palín, Guatemala, in the mountains that my *abuelito*, your great-grandfather, was proud to work on. Mountains that his father and his grandparents before him cultivated. This journey continued when your *abuelita* (grandmother) and *abuelito* (grandfather), twenty-eight years ago, made the difficult decision to travel thousands of miles north in order to imagine a world different for their children than the one that was available to them.

I am here now, around the same age that your *abuelito* and *abuelita* were when they immigrated to the U.S. with you and them at the steps of the academic ivory tower. Before you were even conceived, but with you in mind, I too undertook a journey of hundreds of miles north from Southern California to imagine a world different for me and you than the one I grew up in. This migration journey has now taken me one thousand miles east of you into a different state. With each migration, I have realized that I am a guest in lands originally occupied by different Indigenous peoples. I now reside on lands that are held in stewardship by the Cheyenne, Arapaho, and Ute peoples. It is through their forced sacrifices that I am now able to be here and work in my current university. However, I recognize that in many ways I do not belong to this place and to their histories. Here, I resonate with Cherokee scholar Justice (2016) words: “I am a guest here to listen, learn, and walk gently so as not to hinder those who belong here in their work and in maintaining and sometimes healing their ongoing relationships. And that

is at it should be” (p. 26). I have lived in the U.S. for more than twenty-five years. More specifically, I came of age in Southern California and my relationships with other Central Americans, Latinxs, Chicanxs³, and Mexicans shaped my being. All of this should point to Southern California being my home. It is not. I invoke Justice’s (2016) words once again because they get at the bottom of what I am trying to write to you:

[T]here is no doubt that we can live in a place for years and not belong to it. I hope to live in this region for many long and happy years, and I fully expect that I will continue to have a meaningful relationship to the land, its people, and the territorial protocols that have shaped life and relations here since time immemorial, but it is not my center, not matter how much I love it. (p.30)

I have loved the different regions I have lived in, and while my center is Palín, I also carry my home wherever I go (Anzaldúa, 1999). I am here and you are here because of your *abuelita* and *abuelito*, and they are here because of their parents. One day, *mijo*, you will make this journey too. The circle is not complete, it just unfolds in spirals.

El yo indígena, Indigenous Remembrance and Reclamation

I want to share with you *historias* of my Indigenous remembrance and reclamation. These *historias* are interwoven with my many experiences that include a dialectic process of meaning making between my current academic trajectory, schooling in Palín and the U.S., immigration history, and my relationships with other Indigenous people, Latinxs, and Mexicans in the U.S.

My Indigenous remembrance and reclamation journey began in my mid-twenties while being a graduate student at the University of California. One of the first times I began to deeply think and feel on indigeneity was when I conducted a small qualitative study in a high school of a small town, I lived in located in California’s Central Coast. This was an exploratory study in which I described the high school experiences of recent immigrant Indigenous youth from Oaxaca. While I initially did not go into the high school with the aim of focusing on Indigenous Oaxacans, as I began to get acquainted with them through my community involvement and volunteering at the high school, I started to feel closeness with them. For me, these Indigenous youth looked like me, and interacted with others in similar ways I did. Additionally, a majority of their Mexican and Mexican-descent peers treated them in similar discriminatory ways that my Latinx peers in my youth treated me. This discrimination was based on skin color and other phenotypic characteristics that Latinx peers associated with undesirable indigenous qualities (Barillas-Chón, 2010). To understand such treatment

³ While there are academic debates regarding the use of “Chicanx” (see for example, de Onis, 2017, and Rodriguez, 2017), it is used in this essay as a gender inclusive term.

requires contextualizing Indigenous experiences in Latin America and the United States. So, here, I weave in another *historia*.

Urrieta (2003) wrote that our sense of our Indigenous selves is informed by a U.S. educational system that is deeply rooted in whiteness (p. 163). The foundation of this whiteness, however, has distinct developments and settler-colonial (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014; Wolfe, 1999) and coloniality (Quijano & Wallerstein, 1992; Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010) histories in what we now call the United States and Latin America, respectively. These histories are important to acknowledge in the embodied experiences of people like me who are Indigenous *and* immigrant because it is in us where such colonialities overlap (Blackwell, 2010; Blackwell, Boj Lopez, & Urrieta, 2017). For instance, I attended a “mix-rural” school in Palín that taught us only in Spanish and required us to wear uniforms. Intentions behind teaching in Spanish and requiring uniforms were to create uniformity of language and clothing. One consequence of this was the gradual erasure of Indigenous identity because it denied students the right to speak their Indigenous languages and wear their Indigenous clothing. These practices are rooted in the colonization of the Americas and the ontological and epistemological distinctions established between Western Europeans and the newly invented “*indio/a*” among other non-Europeans (Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Mignolo 1992, 1995). Specifically, racial differences were created in order to establish and sustain power regimes and relationships of marginality between Western Europeans and the “*indio/a*” (Dussel, 1995; Grosfoguel, 1999; Mignolo, 1995; Quijano, 2000). Moreover, such differences were transformed into values (Castro-Klaren, 2008). This is important, *mijo*, because it helped maintain hierarchies of race, whereby Western Europeans were seen as fully human and Indigenous people as lesser or sub-human. Therefore, all that was connected to indigeneity, that is, to a perceived inferiority, needed to be done away with, and schools, among other institutions, served as a mechanism of this coloniality.

In the United States, settler-colonialism operates as a distinct structure (Wolfe, 1999). The basis for settler-colonialism was not originally race, rather, the dispossession of Indigenous peoples from the lands they inhabited. Nonetheless, settler-colonialism, like coloniality, has the same goal: Indigenous erasure. Some methods of Indigenous erasure are the establishment of citizenship categories and construction of race (Grande, et al, 2015; Wolfe, 1999). Here I want to show you, *mjio*, what I mean when I say that it is in me that colonialities overlap. I believe I was the only Maya student, or among some of the very few, in many of my classes in primary and secondary school in the U.S. While my classmates often mistook me as Mexican, I never identified as such. Here you can see how even my peers, forgetting that their ancestors were made “illegal” and “Mexican” by the imposition of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848), contributed to notions of citizenship by establishing who is or is not Mexican versus “American.” My sense of being Indigenous from Palín was anchored, even then, in my

family and memories of my life in a town with a ceiba⁴ tree at its center. It is something very curious that in the U.S. people from Latin America, regardless of different countries of origin, are grouped in the category “Latina/o” or “Hispana/o.” These labels are a U.S. invention (Wallerstein, 2005), *mijo*, not only utilized to maintain racial hierarchies but also to continue the invisibilization of Indigenous people.

Movimientos que Perduran/Enduring Movements.

Here I want to make a detour in order to share with you some of what I know about immigration and experiences of Indigenous people from Latin America in the U.S. I share this because it is a roadmap to how I came to understand the complexities of who I am as an Indigenous immigrant and of others who come from similar background as mine.

Immigrant transition into the U.S. is difficult. Much is known, at least in the U.S. among other Latin American immigrants, of how difficult this transition is: of the linguistic, cultural, and documented obstacles that one confronts daily. Others have written about the abrupt and jarring awareness of being undocumented or coming of age as undocumented (e.g., Gonzales, 2011; Pérez, 2009; The S.I.N. Collective, 2007, 2009). More and more, people who study Latin American immigration are beginning to write about the uniqueness of the Central American experience (e.g., Alvarado, Estrada & Hernández, 2017; Arias, 2003, 2013). When immigrants from Guatemala and other Latin American countries come to the United States, they also confront the reality of a country that does not want them but needs them. Examples of this are evident when immigrants are viewed through a labor force or economic integration lens only. From this perspective, immigrants are disposable labor; they have no name, no story, thus, no humanity. This makes it acceptable to dehumanize them as evident in the current political climate and discourses in which they are viewed as a “plague” that threatens the wellbeing of the U.S. Nonetheless, immigrants are also needed, not for the varied forced contributions they make, but rather for their labor. These are tough lessons, *hijo*.

This feeling of being wanted and not being wanted is paradoxical. Not being wanted takes shape in the racism that one endures, even when one is born in this country. This sense of not being wanted has taken its most recent form in the public acts of racism that the current presidency engendered, but which is foundational to this country’s history. What is not much known, or rather, what is not widely spoken about among Latin Americans, immigrants, and those born in this country of Latin American-descent and Latinxs is the discrimination based on racism that takes place within our own communities. This racism is evident when we are insulted with the racial epithet “*india/o*.” Reasons for this intra-group racism are complex. One major reason for it is due to a “*colonialismo interno*” (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010) or the internalization of colonialism. Non-Indigenous

⁴ For Mayas, the ceiba is a sacred tree of life that connects the earth to the cosmos.

Latinxs and Latin Americans do this both intentionally and, in many cases, unconsciously. Indigenous people in particular also confront the reality that such discrimination migrates with them as evident in their interactions with other Latin Americans, Latinxs, and even Chicanxs in the United States. I refer to my current studies to illustrate the aforementioned points.

My current studies focus on how Latin American people use the word *indio/a* when referring to Indigenous people. Specifically, the word *indio/a* is used as a form of insult and to dehumanize Indigenous people. This use of *indio/a* has a long history in Latin America. What I want to emphasize is that this type of discrimination against Indigenous people, and the logic that makes it happen, is brought over with Latin Americans as they immigrate into the United States. When Latin Americans immigrate to the United States, they bring with them ways of understanding and operating in the world. These understandings are then relied on to ground themselves and navigate the new contexts of reception in the U.S., which most often are unwelcoming. Such anchoring keeps Latin Americans connected with spaces and places of origin and belonging. At the same time, Latin Americans also bring ways of understanding that harm. I must be clear, *mijo*, that such ways of understanding and operating in the world are not innate to a Latin American “culture”—that is, I do not want you to think that they are cultural. Such ways of understanding and being were imposed in Latin America by colonizers. However, they have been ingrained in Latin America so much that they have become part of everyday life, persisting because of coloniality (Maldonado-Torres, 2007) and informing intrapersonal relationships, including deficit perspectives and negative treatment of indigenous people.

For those who have internalized colonialism, this need for “*indio/a*” is due to a false sense of superiority (Barillas Chón, in press) and a claim to a place in a racialized world based on dehumanization. Calling Indigenous and non-Indigenous Latin American people and Latinxs *indio/a* is a colonial remnant that we have inherited. But it does not have to be a remnant that has to persist. These words hurt. They oppress us—they also oppress the ones that say this to us. What I mean is that there is a contraction in *colonialismo interno* because it dehumanizes those who seek a place in a colonial world using colonial logic. This colonial logic dehumanizes both the colonizer and colonized (Freire, 2000; Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010). It is the continuation of coloniality that aims to create Indigenous people as inferior. For this reason, the use of *indio/a* as a racial epithet is used to shame the Indigenous out of us in order to separate us from our Indigenous roots, with the purpose of erasing us politically, culturally, and socially. At the same time, Latin Americans and Latinxs who use colonial logic also deny their Indigenous backgrounds and ancestors, thus contributing to their own dehumanization.

Yet, Indigenous people resist. One way we do this is by telling our *historias*. Vizenor (2008) calls this “survivance.” For Vizenor, “survivance...is more than survival, more than endurance or mere response; the stories of survivance are an active presence...survivance is an active

repudiation of dominance, tragedy, and victimry.” (p. 15). What this means for us, *hijo*, is that our *autohistorias* are meant to connect us with our past in order to navigate the present and plant seeds for the future (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010). They are roadmaps from which we can enact change.

Re/member/ing.

I now want to circle back to the *historia* of my initial studies with Indigenous youth from Oaxaca because it weaves into my Indigenous remembrance and reclamation. Just like these youth, I also was made fun of by my Latinx peers. The source of this mockery was my dark brown skin, Maya nose, height, coarse hair, and thick lips. In other words, they made fun of what they perceived to be Indigenous characteristics. These types of ridicule toward Indigenous immigrants, in and out of school settings, unfortunately, are common (e.g., Barillas-Chón, 2010; Fox, 2005, 2006; Pérez, Vasquez, & Buriel, 2016; Stephen, 2007). You can see here how Latinxs and Latin Americans continue the project of coloniality, for the latter, even while they no longer live in Mexico or other Latin American countries.

As I was learning, documenting, interpreting, and writing about the stories the Oaxacan youth shared with me, I was simultaneously thinking about my own lived experiences and how similar they felt to what I was witnessing with their own narratives. In this case, I was making meaning along with the youth about their and my own indigeneity. Up to that moment, I had immersed myself in the literature on Latinxs and education and Latinxs and immigration. These literatures, while speaking broadly about some of the experiences I felt and lived, did not immediately speak to my unique views, feelings, and understandings. I felt that just like Oaxacan youth, my experiences were not included in the literature on Latinxs—which shows you again how powerful coloniality and the invisibilization of Indigenous people is. This initial study, both, provided the foundation for my interest in Indigenous and immigrant youth from Latin America in schools and sparked a process that I have taken on more seriously and cautiously of Indigenous “re/member/ing.”

The process of “member/ing” myself as Indigenous and into Indigenous communities has been extremely difficult. The “member” in “member/ing” refers to a self-identification process of being a member of the Maya diaspora based on shared lived experiences, worldviews, beliefs, and ways of relating to and being with the world around me. Many times, I have questioned the extent of my indigeneity, thus “membering” myself in-and-out of the Maya diaspora. For instance, I have asked myself “how much am I truly Maya?” Underlying my concerns and insecurities is a larger question of what it means to be Indigenous. I have deeply struggled with this question since my initial study of Oaxacan youth and have at times hesitated to call myself Indigenous, or membering into the Maya diaspora. Reasons for these are because I do not speak an Indigenous language and while I was born in Palín, a town that is proud to be the center of the Poqomam culture, I grew up in California.

How does one then claim Indigenous belonging or go about membering? It has been through my personal academic journey, intellectual and community work and participation, and personal spiritual reflections, introspection, and “re/memberings” that I have come to view, feel, and speak of myself as Maya. All these processes have facilitated a re/membering of my indigeneity. By “re/membering” I mean a remembering of my genealogy, my place of origin, and the stories of the Maya people as retold by others in oral traditions and in writing that facilitates a membering. Thus, a remembering to membering, or to use Grande et al (2015) words: a reclamation of indigeneity. Your *abuelita* and her family are the umbilical cord that physically attaches me to my Indigenous ancestors. My town Palín grounds me to an Indigenous center. The stories I have read in books and heard from others about my Maya ancestors connect me to other Indigenous people in Guatemala and the rest of Latin America.

Comienzos/Beginnings

I was about nine years old when we made the journey to *el norte*, The North. Remembering this trip requires stitching together pieces of memories in which I travel back to that time, viewing my experiences from a simultaneous nine-year-and-thirty-seven-year-old self. One of my most enduring memories of the trip to *el norte*, is arriving at the México-U.S. border. Flashlights and a white moon lit the dirt hills of this cold and dark night. *La frontera*, this border, seemed cold, and although there were others with us waiting to hire a *coyote*, or smuggler, that would cross us into the U.S., the place felt lonesome. This open wound that Gloria Anzaldúa (1999) wrote about is also a living one. It is collectively shared and re-lived daily by many immigrants like me and like your grandparents. It was not always like this *mijo*. This border is both an “invention” and concrete reality. It is a settler colonial invention (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014; Smith, 2012) that created names that did not exist before for people original to these lands. For instance, under settler-colonialism, the original inhabitants of the U.S. Southwest such as the Tohono O’odham who for thousands of years lived in what is now Southern Arizona and the northern Mexican state of Sonora, not only became “Indian” or “Native American” but also “American” or “Mexican.” What this means, *hijo*, is that the Tohono O’odham were ascribed racial categories (which are also tied to citizenship status) that they did not use prior to the imposition of the border to talk about themselves and others. In this sense, the border created categories of people (Brady, 2002): Indian, “American”, and “Mexican.” Reasons for the border, among others, were to establish who belonged and who did not, and to control the land and its resources (Dubnar Ortiz, 2014; Grande, San Pedro, & Windchief, 2015, Wolfe, 1999). In other words, it was meant to divide, separate, and remove indigenous people with the intention of sustaining particular relationships of power and marginality. Never forget this, my son.

I remember seeing dim lights in the distance. Through my nine-year-old mind and eyes I wondered if what I was seeing in *el otro lado*, the other side, was the mythical U.S. of A. At this border, my father hired a *coyote* that would smuggle us into the U.S. After waiting for a while, a small hatchback with its lights turned off, arrived and picked us up. The driver took us to a hideaway house in the other side of the U.S. My father and I, along with another person were crammed in the back of the hatchback. Laying in the backseat of the car was my mother and sister with what I believe was another person next to them. On the floor of the car was one person and stacked on top of them one more. The crossing over was dark, bumpy, and scary. My father was embracing me, and I asked him to pray with me for our safe travels, to pray for our crossing.

We waited in one of the bedrooms of the hideaway house for about seven days. For my five-year-old sister and me it felt as if we waited for weeks. The room was dark, without any furnishing. It had one bathroom to be used by all of us crowded inside the room. I felt scared and uncomfortable to be in a small room with strangers. We kept to ourselves and so did the others who were attempting to get to their new home. Finally, our day arrived to start our new life in the U.S. It must have been around noon when we got into a car, this time just the four of us in addition to the driver and a companion. The driver told us to keep low so as not to be spotted through the tinted windows. Within a couple of hours, they told us that we were able to sit upright; that we were safe. If only that had been true. Soon after arriving to the United States undocumented, we entered what Menjívar (2006) referred to as “liminal legality.” This meant that we were able to work here but were not residents and were subject to deportation at any moment. Therefore, for the first thirteen years of our arrival in the U.S., our safety and stay were precarious, always in danger.

Our move to the U.S. ungrounded us since we could not physically travel back to Palín and reconnect with our people, land, and ancestors. Thus, our traveling was emotional, psychological, and spiritual. We crossed geographic and political borders without physically travelling them. No one needs *papeles*, those documents that legitimize “legality” in the U.S., for these kinds of crossings. Even to this day, while we can physically travel to Palín, we continue to be emotional, psychological and spiritual crossers. Our life is one of crossing borders and living those in-between geographic, emotional, psychological and physical spaces. We adapted to the life in-between.

Ref/lecciones: Lessons

My parents decided to leave Palín, the center of the Poqomam culture and language, their home, and my two older brothers behind and travel close to three thousand miles to make a home on a different place. Never again feeling at home in either place. My parents’ exodus from Guatemala, unlike many others who were fleeing civil wars during the 1980s, was not directly

the result of a threat to their lives. Rather, the reason for coming to the United States was based on a desire to imagine a different world for their children. A world of educational and economic possibilities, denied to them back home, where their children could grow healthy and prosper. It was a decision made out of love. A dominant discourse in the U.S. regarding immigration often centers economic reasons, such as economic integration (Barajas, 2012, 2014; Portes & Rumbaut, 2014). For those of us who study immigration, reasons for immigrating are complex and historically specific. Yet, lacking from such conversations is the role that love plays in immigrating. Love is a strong force that keeps immigrants going: our love for our children, for ourselves, and for our future generations. Similar to other immigrants, your *abuelita* and *abuelito*'s love for their children was a generating force behind their exodus. For many years, while their desire to imagine a different and better world for their children was very much alive, the reality was different.

Mijo, holding on to these memories of immigration that I have shared with you and which I have pieced together are important and painful because they marked our departure from Palín and signaled the many forms of travelling between “here” and “there” that we would engage in over the many years. These *historias* of immigration from Palín to the U.S., from California to the Pacific Northwest, and now to the lands of the Cheyenne, Arapaho and Utes are now part of your own immigration journey. These memories are also significant because they are part of my Indigenous remembrance and reclamation. One that I hope you are able to undertake whenever you are ready. Finally, this *autohistoria* is about my understandings of being Indigenous and immigrant in the United States. They are about survivance (Vizenor, 2008), relationship making (Wilson, 2008), and healing from colonialism. If you listen carefully, there are *lecciones* in this *historia* that I hope you are able to *reflexionar* on and discern. I am also learning about them as I share them with you.

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