

RESEARCH AS STARSHINE:

MAKING UP METHODOLOGY IN *THE MAKING OF INDIGENEITY*

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The Making of Indigeneity: Curriculum History and the Limits of Diversity
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I was a bit anxious—even intimidated—about the invitation to contribute to a Provoking Dialogues panel on Dr. Licho López’s new book at the 2018 Bergamo conference. López had responded to my book with Gregory Michie and Pamela Konkol, *Worth Striking for* (Nuñez, Michie, & Konkol, 2015), as part of a Provoking Dialogues session at the conference 3 years prior. Her presentation was insightful, critical, and devastatingly smart (Nuñez, López, Kempf, Job, Huckaby, & Konkol, 2017). I was honored by the respect she showed to my work by thinking about it so deeply and carefully. I knew I would be unable to reciprocate in this response, but I was well trained as a scholar to say yes even when I doubt my abilities. My mentors, the Bills (Schubert, Ayers, and Watkins), taught me that if they believed I could do something, I was to trust and say yes. Now it’s become a habit, and one for which I’m (mostly) grateful. I am very glad I said yes to this. I feel smarter just for having read López’s groundbreaking book.

Preparing to read a book called *The Making of Indigeneity* sparked some peculiar feelings in me. My maternal grandmother was a full-blooded indigenous woman of the Americas, born in the home of my maternal grandfather, then 10 years old, where her family lived and worked as servants. This was in Yahualica, a town outside Guadalajara, Mexico. My grandfather’s family was full-blooded Spanish. When the two married 15 years later, they embarked on the remaking of the Mestizo race through their 12 children, dozens of grandchildren, and so on through our family lineage. Their respective families disapproved, and they emigrated to the United States. While I know this story as part of family legend, I am almost completely disconnected from my grandmother’s indigeneity. I don’t know the specifics of my grandmother’s bloodline, what her heritage language was, or whether her family spoke it. She passed away almost 20 years ago, but I couldn’t ask her about it even if I could go back in time.

My parents met in Los Angeles shortly after my father arrived with his family at age 13 from Cuernavaca, Mexico. My mother's family had been in L.A. since she was 6, and they started dating in high school. Since my father was learning English and my mother by this time was fluent, their relationship was built in their shared second language. Still, I was a simultaneous bilingual as an infant and young child, since my grandparents cared for me while my parents worked. When I was 3 and my brother and sister had been born, my parents suddenly began to worry about us going to school. With traumatic memories of being Spanish speakers in Los Angeles public schools, my parents moved us to the suburbs. By the time I started Kindergarten, I was monolingual.

Despite living in the United States for many decades, my grandmother never mastered English. I have many beautiful memories of her, but none of them are conversations of complexity and depth, and I know next to nothing about her indigeneity. I share ancestry with neither López, who is Colombian, nor with the book, which addresses curriculum history in Guatemala. But I do feel a curious sense of connection to the making, or in my case the unmaking, of indigeneity and to the topic of language heritage(s), for me un-revitalized and/or unknown—which brings me to the saga of the forewords.

As I began López's book, beginning with the front matter, I was confronted with a text that was wholly unintelligible to me. My attention was piqued, and I assumed it was written in an indigenous language. I was impressed by the provocative inclusion of an essay that a tiny fraction of the book's audience would be able to read. Eager to experience whatever López had in mind with the inclusion, I gamely tried reading and got all the way through the first page before giving up. I turned the next few pages and got to a new section titled "Prólogo." This text I recognized as Spanish, and, as I once again dug in, I was happily surprised to discover that I was getting quite a bit of meaning from the passage. Wow—I was not BS-ing when I taught my students that academic texts can sometimes be easier for language learners to read than seemingly more simple casual language because of the abundance of cognates (Díaz-Rico, 2013)! It was still tough going, but a satisfying effort, until I got to the second paragraph's listing of several names. I recognized the names from the previous section, which I then realized was another version of the prologue. Since the essay had been translated between the indigenous language and Spanish, I reasoned that there was a good chance it had also been translated into English. I didn't flip to the English foreword *immediately* on making that realization, but I didn't get as far into the Spanish version as I did into the first one. No wonder I've never reclaimed my heritage language.

This was the first of many "moments of intensity" (López's phrase and a recurrent theme in the book) I experienced while reading this book. The "wavelike effect of excesses of affect and emotion" arose at times from the connection (and disconnection) with my family history, at times from the way the book's historical journey brings past human motivations to life, at

times from the disruptive power of López's critique of educational aims I hadn't yet questioned, and at times from the beauty of the book's structure and writing.

The creativity of the book's organization made the reading fun, but also a little scary, like a roller coaster ride, or a class with a brilliant professor for which I'm not sure I have the background knowledge. OK, very much like the latter of these. The chapter titled "Zero = Nothing = Everything" (and numbered with both '0' and one of the Mayan symbols for the concept) was a helpful guide, beginning with several "signpost statements" that assisted in mapping out the complexity of the concept and representations of the indigenous peoples of Guatemala. The book is identified as "about education" and focused specifically on teacher education in the process of "making up" the people who are the phenomena of interest in the study. I learned about Ian Hacking's "five-aspect dynamic framework of analysis" for this process, through which López examines the construction of the "Indian" in Guatemala with particular attention to the role of schooling and the preparation of teachers. In what is my favorite passage from the book, López characterizes her data as:

the archive of things—said, remembered, photographed and written—that are grouped together in distinct figures, composed together in accordance with multiple relations, maintained or blurred in accordance with specific regularities. This determines that they do not withdraw at the same place in time, but shine, as it were, like stars—some that seem close to us are shining brightly from afar, whereas others that are in fact close to us are already growing pale. (p. 15)

This paragraph, beautiful and poetic as the book as a whole, encapsulates my experience of reading, with ideas maintained where they constellate with my experience or prior learning and blurring almost immediately where they do not. And just as she describes, some of the historical persons in the book seem to be speaking to me from the next room, while some of the near contemporaries appear to be communicating across vast stretches of time.

The photographs in Chapter 1 provide starlight that illuminates the historical text and analysis of how the "Indian" was framed in Guatemala as "innocent, dirty, barefoot, in need, and a problem." The images illustrate the evolution envisioned by the educational policy documents quoted and cited in the chapter, wherein the shoeless children photographed outdoors in a rural setting in Figure 1.1 represent the starting point for the indigenous people of Guatemala. Figure 1.2 shows the Indian taking the first step on the journey to modernity and redemption by earning the soul's salvation. Here, an indigenous child, still barefoot, poses in an indoor studio having completed the Roman Catholic sacrament of First Communion. Figure 1.3, the final image in the chapter, shows a dark-skinned but clearly mixed-race child who has successfully surpassed the status of "Indian" and is now termed "Ladino Boy." He is now shod, dressed in Western-style garments, seated indoors with an open book in his lap, and reaching up to touch the globe on a table next to him. The "Indian

problem” of backwardness is to be solved by religion and education, with Christianity and literacy as the recognized markers of the problem’s solution: modernity.

Chapter 2 on language heritage(s) struck me as particularly timely in the run-up to the United Nations Year of Indigenous Languages in 2019. In spite (perhaps because?) of my linguistic limitations, language is an area of particular interest for me. Many of the insights in this chapter sparkle like stars in their own right, or as they reflect what I’ve learned by teaching courses in the English as a Second Language certification sequence for practicing teachers. The first is the idea of language as invention, that the process of naming and describing the features, relationships, and structures that constitute a language does not simply reflect, but actually creates a complex, rule-bound system out of something infinitely more complex and chaotic: the way that a group of humans engage with their world and each other. Similarly, López’s discussion of the territorialization, separation, and enumeration of languages revealed that these are, of course, another level of invention. Modes of engagement move fluidly in and out of spaces, into and through each other, and combine and multiply at will—or they do until invented as languages, located, classified, and categorized. It wasn’t a surprise to read about the evangelical purposes of early linguists and preservationists—after all, Chapter 1 already made clear that Christian salvation is the necessary first step in solving the “Indian problem.” Nevertheless, the relationship between religion and science in the motivations of people like those pictured in Figure 2.1 was fascinating to contemplate. The term “comparative philology” was new to me, as was the concept of “first rank” and inferior languages based on features like inflection. Finally, the way that indigenous languages and texts in those languages were used to teach the colonial language reminded me of subtractive forms of bilingual education in the United States, wherein students develop literacy in their home languages primarily for the purpose of transferring that ability to English, and native-language instruction ends once students are proficient in their second (or subsequent) language.

In Chapter 3 on anthropological borders, the brightest light for me shone from the 1946 survey that asked the general population in Guatemala to define the “ ‘indigenous’ ethnic group.” López explains that the study itself was an application of the “indigenist policies” then in vogue in the scholarly community, a change in approach to addressing the “Indian problem” through deepened knowledge and understanding of Guatemala’s indigenous peoples and communities. It is difficult for me to imagine that such an important demarcation—the criteria for classification as indigenous—would be left to the public, even if the respondents were mostly non-indigenous, but I suppose this demonstrated a privileging of local—even indigenous—knowledge. Or the appearance of it—as López points out, the five possible criteria provided by the survey are far from comprehensive, and there is little in the way of explanation for how these were selected. In addition to the fact of the survey itself, I also found the results surprising. The only two factors that proved generalizable across Guatemala for determining indigeneity were customs and language. While the survey results held a

pleasant surprise in showing that race was generally not considered important in making a determination of indigenous status, I share López's skepticism as to whether this reflects the absence of racism or the possibility of boundary-less social solidarity. Other twinklings in this chapter emanate from the "India María" skits performed by teacher candidates and transcribed for inclusion here in several parts. Her character resists and ridicules the project of conversion and the notion of progress, insisting that she is not a problem to be fixed.

The stars in Chapter 4 on authoritarian regimes are simultaneously bright and faded, both contemporary and dated. There are concepts here that are blindingly reflective of forces of authority that are familiar from the United States, as well as many themes that López traces back to colonial times. She notes that Guatemala is still constructed as "behind," just as it has been through each of the historical eras the book considers. While her analysis of educational policy documents shows that schooling has always been central to the nation's rectifying of this problem, currently the solution has been located in the movement for teacher education reform. She describes the seemingly common-sense move to extend the time (by 3 years!) that candidates spend preparing to teach, as well as the consequences of this change: additional expense and restricted access to teacher preparation and the teaching profession. The latter shifts, whether intended or unintended, have the obvious result of making it more difficult for indigenous students to become teachers. Echoing the public and political conversation in the United States, the educational system seems perpetually in crisis. In Guatemala's case, the crisis dates to colonial times and reflects a ceaseless reaching toward modernity and a constantly receding vision of the future. A sparkling section subheaded "Quality" describes how authoritarian regimes utilize concepts, such as the one the section is named for, that are immune to interrogation—who would dare question the importance of quality?—and dissolve into "a multiplicity of other slippery signifiers." In another reflection of the U.S. context, "quality" is nevertheless determined to be "measurable," and it is attained through instrumentalism and audit culture. This techno-rationalist perspective on and approach to education is, sadly, representative of the road to modernity. Another "authoritarian curricular line" that glowed for me was the goal of development. This concept is similarly fluid, encompassing the human, societal, career, spiritual, and countless other forms of development. It adds, however, the imperative of ceaseless improvement and the image of a continually ascending line on a graph, which, like the notion of progress or hopes for the stock market, ignores the fact that unfettered growth in the usually cyclical natural world is most likely to be a form of cancer.

The last chapter is beautifully titled "No Closure." The stars here shine so brightly. There is the quotation of contemporary comments questioning the authenticity of people who identify as Mayan, and the ensuing discussion of how "Indigenous peoples, like other peoples made different, are often turned into fixities in the making of policies, in curriculum planning, for educational reforms, and in political discussions within academia, on the streets, and by the state" (p. 171). There is the section on teachers' resistance, a topic close to my heart as

evidenced by my own book (Nuñez, Michie, & Konkol, 2015). This part of the chapter also explores the phenomenon of teacher pretending, which is absent from my book. I wish I had considered the ways that teachers pretend to be “trapped and lost,” while rebelling with their students “when no one is watching.” There is the *Mira*. photo project, through which students and teacher candidates selected 33 archived photographs depicting indigeneity in Guatemala and will be soliciting 33 talkback images from high school students in the United States, Australia, and Guatemala.

I learned so much from reading this book: about history, about theory, about linguistics—even about mathematics in Chapter 4’s intriguing discussion of fractals. What impressed me most about the book was the way that it challenges methodological boundaries. I keep coming back to López’s metaphor of data as starshine, because I do feel more like I’ve spent a night of wonder under a starry sky than like I’ve read a traditional ethnography. One of the brightest stars is the poem directly addressing academic research that opens Chapter 5. It should be read in its entirety, but I will quote just the end, where López proclaims:

My inquiry does not produce
Results of experiments
Like syphilis in women’s bodies
Black bodies in massive prisons
Or ethnic wars
It produces agitation
Screams desire to escape
Demands and builds
The impossible

There is no “so?”
Or “I understand what you are against
But what are you for?”
What I am for is against you!
And your violence upon that which opposes you
And your ruthless dictatorship
Over what counts as being
Thinking
And
Doing

So what I’ve got is a message for that sister
you believe you took
She no longer needs you
She never needed you

She is invention
She is marroonage
She is everything you can't keep (p. 169)

So is Licho López, who has placed a constellation in a book that shines like a star.

References

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