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Preserving and Forgetting:  
How the Indigenous Mexican Minorities Translate to  
United States' Minority Politics, Discourse, and Education of Language

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In the United States, immigration is a big issue, especially immigration from Mexico. What to do with the immigrants (and their children) already in the United States is, arguably, an even bigger issue. It is plastered all over the news: should they go to public schools? should they be allowed to work legally? should they get healthcare? Should they be eligible for drivers' licenses? should they be able to find resources in their native language? should immigrants be sent back? As members of American communities, we get barraged with these debates every day.

One of the more evident problems with many of these debates is their tendency to refer to immigrants as if they weren't here, or didn't have a say, or were things---to infantilize or dehumanize them. One of the, by its very nature, less obvious problem is the tendency to treat immigrants as being of a set type: they are illegal or legal, first generation or second, Mexican or Puerto Rican.

In Mexico the situation is little better: Maybe the issues were a little less publicized, less debated, but the history of symbolic violence and ethnic resistance (Hernandez Castillo 2001: 46-47), with various infantilizing and dehumanizing policies (2001: 46-74) and eventually a war (xiv) speaks volumes about the problems that Mexico has in dealing civilly with its minorities.

From these two cases, it seems that being a minority involves marginalization and power struggles no matter where you are. But what

about those immigrants that are minorities in the country they're coming from? Surely, if Mexico has such marked minority classes, that structure and social hierarchy would migrate with the people to the United States? This paper attempts to analyze the experience of Mexican cultural minorities that have migrated to the United States, specifically those in the Latino neighborhoods of the San Francisco Bay Area, and how the discourse, social structure, and lived experience in Mexico affects and blends with the new discourse, social structure, and experience in the San Francisco Bay Area (SFBA).

#### I. Parallels and Leaps of Logic: Extrapolating from other Contexts

First, to establish context, I looked at similar dynamics of class and ethnicity. Two of these, of course, are the experience of Spanish-speaking Mexican immigrants in the United States, and the experience of non-Spanish-speaking indigenous peoples in Mexico. These two scenarios are not as different as they would seem at first: in both, a minority, lower class and from a poorer country, is expected to assimilate and work for meager amounts of money and small amounts of respect (Hernandez-Castillo 2001; Keiser 2000). In both, national politics greatly affect what minorities are 'supposed' to be, what language(s) they are expected to speak, how they are going to be educated, and what rights

they have (Hernandez-Castillo 2001; Adamson 2005). Recently, after a few generations of people believing that it was good to adapt to the language of the majority, several movements have been put in place so that future generations can learn the language of their parents and grandparents, and not "lose their roots" (Hernandez-Castillo 2001:131; Adamson 2005; Snow 1990). Parents and community leaders fall on both sides of the debate: should children be bilingual and speak our native language, or should they acculturate to where they are now, and learn the language of the country they live in?

A third similar context is the case of the Yucatec Maya communities in Cayo, Belize (Colas 2007). This might seem like it would have less similarities than the first two synecdochic scenarios, but is actually a lot more similar: Yucatec Maya emigrated out of Mexico after indigenous rebellion, settling in an English-speaking country with Spanish-speaking minorities (and surrounded by Spanish-speaking countries). These Maya communities thus settled into a tri-lingual setting, code switching from the English spoken by the majority, the Spanish spoken by minorities from the surrounding Latin-American countries, and the local Yucatec spoken at home (Colas 2007). Though people did not want to talk about their history, they continued to use Yucatec as a form of cultural resistance against the forces of globalization and Belizean nationalism (Colas 2007). However, when the

communities split into separate churches, they stopped speaking Yucatec to each other, and spoke only Spanish with Yucatec Maya of other communities. Thus, the people born within 1985 and 1995 were not taught Yucatec, or stopped learning Yucatec at an early age, because Spanish fulfilled the role that Yucatec had in separating their identity from the nationalistic, Belizean one. This weakened sense of ethnic identity allowed them to receive outside influence to a higher degree, which led to further loss of ethnic memory and folk practices. In short: in this rather precarious trilingual system, only two languages could be sustained, and when learning Spanish became more practical than learning Yucatec, the rates of spoken Yucatec went way down.

It seems that the initial situation in Cayo was similar to the initial situation of indigenous Mexican people in the United States. The question is: what happens then? Is there a pattern of replacing their native language with Spanish? A pattern of acclimating completely to English-speaking? A successful trilingual community?

## II. Literature on Mexican Indigenous Minorities

John U. Ugbu (1991) speaks of two types of minority frameworks: the immigrant framework and the 'involuntary minority' framework. While the immigrant framework involves being "motivated by the hope of

economic success or political freedom" (1991:23), the involuntary minorities "conclude that they are worse off than [sic] they ought to be because of the way they are treated by the dominant group" (1991:23). It seems to me that indigenous Mexican immigrants show traits of both: they were involuntary minorities in Mexico, but traveled to the United States as immigrants. Thus, given a community of Mexican immigrants, they would be exposed to some discourses and social class markers of Mexico (where they were an involuntary minority) and some discourses and social class markers of the United States (where they are willing immigrants). Furthermore, "internal differentiation within the community's Mexican-descent population reflects differences between immigrants and nonimmigrants in terms of both social and structural contexts in which they operate, as well as social class differences..." (Matute-Bianchi 1991:213), leading to very complex nets of American and Mexican parallel (but often contradictory) discourses of class, race<sup>1</sup>, social status, and economic status.

When speaking strictly of the recent Mexican immigrant in the school system (or the children of such an immigrant), Matute-Bianchi found that recent immigrant students "make distinctions among themselves, using the class-based reference framework of Mexico (e.g.,

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<sup>1</sup> In Mexico, the main racial markers, left over from colonial days, are between *Ladino* (Spanish-descent), *Mestizo* (mixed Spanish and indigenous descent), *Indio* (indigenous), *Mulato* (mixed Spanish and African descent), and *Zambo* (mixed African and indigenous descent), with *ladinos* on top and *zambos* at the very bottom. The most common categories are *ladino*, *meztizo*, and *indio*, and so the *indio* is usually at the bottom of the social ladder.

rural versus urban, upper class versus working class, *mestizo* versus *indio*" (1991:216). She also found, however, that *among students* this changed after about five years or so. Thus, the status markers of Mexico diminished in importance over time, as new markers were acquired and new skills (and discourses) were learned. A more lasting correlation was that of language, since "among these recent immigrants, those who are relatively proficient in Spanish (both oral and written) tend to be more academically successful than those who are functioning well below grade level in Spanish" (Matute-Bianchi 1991:216). Indigenous Mexican immigrants, then, are at a disadvantage, since their primary language is not Spanish and they may speak it poorly or with an accent, and sometimes not write it at all (Hernandez-Castillo 2001). Matute-Bianchi further argues that "educational intervention programs and policies aimed at improving academic achievement among Mexican-descent students assume a cultural homogeneity that does not exist and typically focuses on single-cause assessments and solutions to perceived problems" (1991:242), thus not only missing to help the indigenous Mexican students, but failing to notice that those are the students that the educational intervention programs are missing---an issue that aggravates the problem.

### III. Fieldwork and Data: From the Words of a Teacher

Having not found very much specific information when I turned to the literature, I next turned to doing fieldwork firsthand. I interviewed Martina Martinez, a bilingual teacher of the San Francisco Bay Area. Besides having worked with students and parents who spoke only Spanish, she had also worked with students who spoke neither Spanish nor English, as well as parents who spoke Spanish and their native tongue, but whose kids spoke neither Spanish nor English.

As a teacher of several bilingual programs, she spoke of how parents influence what the kids learn. Some parents, fearing discrimination, don't want their kids to learn their native language. Others don't want their child to learn their native language because they feel that their native language connotes lower class status, and they are (or want to be) moving up in the world. Still others don't want their child to learn their native language because of the (she believes, mistaken) idea that children will become traumatized and confused if asked to learn (or know) more than one language at a time. These last are parents who are afraid that if their children do not learn English, they will not be able to make a life for themselves in the United States.

Martina's opinion on all of these views, from what she has seen of the students, is that the most traumatized students are those with the

most severe restrictions on who they can or can't socialize with, or what languages they can or can't speak in. Martina talks about how some kids, afraid to speak in the only language they feel comfortable with, will become too afraid to speak, even to ask for help finding the bathroom, much less asking for help in the classroom. Others will become afraid of language in general, and will refuse to learn English, not speaking at all. Martina relates how such kids are often put in the same classes as the 'mentally challenged' or retarded students, rather than in the typical ESL (English as a Second Language) programs, because ESL only supports 4-8 common foreign languages, depending on the school. As a teacher's aide, she had to teach some of these students that spoke neither English nor Spanish by holding up flashcards of animals and simple pictures that she hoped would be shared concepts across cultural boundaries. Furthermore, such kids were eventually integrated back into the main curriculum, despite the parents' objections.

From grades kindergarten to third grade, parents have a very large part in whether or not their children learn their native language, and whether their children also learn Spanish. From third grade to fifth grade, children often develop an opinion of their own, *often based on discourse they picked up from their parents*, but not always coming to the same conclusions. In middle school, the immigrant parents cannot effectively control who their children will choose to socialize with, and so

the child may pick up Spanish or lose his or her native language, often depending on his peers. In high school, the children often will choose to enroll themselves in Spanish classes if this has been prohibited from learning it *or* make an effort to keep parents from showing up to meetings if they have been raised to only speak English and their parents cannot speak it or cannot speak it well (sometimes the child will do both).

Martina's opinion, from what she has seen of the parents, is that parents can be categorized into two groups, based on their lived experience: those that left never intending to go back (often because of heavy persecution) and want to forget and not reproduce anything relating to their past, and those parents who immigrated to improve their life but have family and roots back home, and so want to reproduce, if not language, at least the ideas of their home village or community.

Furthermore, Martina has been trying to work with the local Mexican consulate to introduce books and material in various indigenous languages both into the bilingual classroom and into the homes of indigenous parents. However, her experience was that indigenous Mexican parents would accept her help as a community leader, but not as a *teacher*, and would stop returning her calls, if she mentioned that she had books from the *Mexican* consulate. All this suggests that there might still be some animosity towards the Mexican government and

particularly its use of teachers to acculturate and assimilate indigenous peoples.

#### IV. Reformulating Questions and Analyzing Data

Martina's experiences meeting indigenous Mexican parents (of her students) at *la pulga* (Mexican flea market) reinforces the idea that "On the one hand, there are observable differences between the various groups in terms of behavior (dress, language, self-presentation, etc.) and attitudes; on the other hand, there is a sense of collective peoplehood as members of a generic Mexican 'family' " (Matute-Bianchi 1991:214).

While I would not go as far as to use the word 'family' as Matute Bianchi did, I believe that in many ways the class dynamic of Mexico, translated to the United States, is in some ways 'safer' than looking beyond the Mexican community microcosm at the complete integrated community, of which the Mexican subculture is such a tiny part. Martina's opinion on this same matter was that not only was it 'safer', but also that it was more familiar, being similar to markets in Mexico and therefore also *a good place for people who speak the same language to meet each other*. Among other things, she noticed various people would come up to her and tentatively speak this language or that<sup>2</sup>, seemingly hoping to get a

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<sup>2</sup> When asked, she could not tell me what those languages had been, only that they had been neither English nor Spanish, and had been spoken by people sporting traditional *indio* dress.

response in the same language. This last interpretation seems to evoke a much larger sense of agency, as well as a sense not only to socialize with other Mexican immigrants, but specifically other Mexican immigrants who share their culture.

However, Martina's stories of the indigenous *children* do not tell such a sociable tale: she claims that parents' intentions for their children to not socialize with those children who speak Spanish leads them to fail to socialize at all, since (especially at smaller or better integrated schools) the odds of finding other children who speak their same native language is unlikely, and often it is the Spanish-speaking children who will have more cultural markers in common, or who will be more accepting of a peer who speaks an indigenous language<sup>3</sup>. Matute Bianchi claims that "differences in parental aspirations for their children, as well as family ideology about preparing for the future and one's place in it, appear to be significant in the messages that are communicated...to successful immigrant Mexicano students" (Matute-Bianchi 1991:235). This seems parallel to Martina's point that a parent will aspire to preserve or forget their parent culture depending on the circumstances of their emigration, and will proceed to socially reproduce their cultural background or not do so, accordingly.

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<sup>3</sup> She claims that this is actually more traumatic to children than other things a parent might do, since at that age (preschool) neither the child nor his peers are likely to understand or care about the racist discourses held by the parents, and that, in fact, socializing might be very beneficial for all of the children.

Matute-Bianchi further argues, as Martina Martinez did, that parents' opinions of how their children should be educated is of "critical importance" (1991:235). Matute-Bianchi further recognizes a "need to collect much more extensive data in this domain," (1991:235), which I believe is a problem which has not been addressed in the 17 years since Matute-Bianchi's article was written. It seems that rather than study the adults and children in completely different contexts, it might actually be beneficial to study the indigenous Mexican immigrants as family units (or even extended family groups!) in order to understand what factors are actually affecting children's success in school. While I am not able to look into this issue further, I believe that much more research is necessary in this area.

## V. A Dose of Reflexivity

One of the main problems with the firsthand field research I was attempting to do was one of access. The research, as intended was going to be three interviews: one with a teacher who has interacted with parents and children of indigenous Mexican descent, one with an indigenous Mexican parent, and one with someone at the Mexican consulate (preferably de Education branch) at San Francisco.

Even with this intended research, there was one very big problem: I am on the other side of the country, and so all of my contact (and organization for contact) was going to be by phone. Why is this a problem? It seems that not only is the social dynamic complex and interesting, but there is a great deal of mistrust from all parties involved--an in-person, informal interview might have been a much more effective and informative one. Furthermore, Martina remarked varies times about the interesting code-switching that occurred at *la pulga* (the local Mexican flea market), and being able to take time to observe such interactions would also have helped me understand the social dynamics. Which people spoke Spanish to each other? Which people spoke English to each other? Which people spoke to each other in their native language? How were these people dressed (did they wear traditional dress when they went)? Observational fieldwork at the school (when the children are picked up and taken home---the main time when mothers talk to each other at school) might also have been helpful, even if observing the classroom were out of the question. Furthermore, such observational fieldwork could have helped me meet parents, and thus find a parent willing to trust me enough to talk to me.

That leads to the second major issue: one of trust. Of the three phone interviews I attempted, only one was completed: the one with a teacher (Martina Martinez, my mother, see Appendix A). The San

Francisco Mexican Consulate, even though it answered my phone calls in courteously, refused to answer my questions, for a variety of reasons (see Appendix B). I would introduce myself, and that was fine, but as soon as I got to "I'd like to ask you some questions..." I was almost immediately interrupted and referred to someone else who would "know how to answer my questions better" or whose opinion was "more relevant." As I alluded to previously, my attempts to get in contact with a parent failed without my even getting to contact any of them. In retrospect, part of the reason why this occurred was that I supposed that Martina would be able to get me in contact with some of these parents. However, she could not give me their name or information without their agreement to such a disclosure. Given their distrust of her and her role as 'teacher', she was having communication trouble already---no one she asked was willing to talk to me.

My attempts at gathering information firsthand, then, were not met with much success. Had I not been so far away, I would have resorted to participant observation, going to places and events where some of the interactions I was interested in might be taking place---and potentially meeting people who would subsequently become interlocutors, or at least be willing to talk to me for a few minutes.

While I had originally meant to study the use of language comparatively, with the study of trilingual indigenous Mexican minority

immigrants (which I hoped to find in the literature) as a backdrop for fieldwork on the different choices on the part of the parents of what to teach or not teach their children, I eventually found that this subject was much too specific: there were no studies I could find on trilingual indigenous Mexican minority immigrants in America. Finding such a gap, I resolved to see what I could find out firsthand on the topic. However, what I found was much an area much too broad, complex, and fraught with political animosity for the scope of this paper or the means and time available to me.

## VI. Applications and Ethical Concerns

One of the biggest questions I had while conducting my research---both of the literature and firsthand---was `Why have these questions not been brought up before? It seems that there is a real gap in the literature: there is an amazingly large quantity of books and articles on Hispanic or Latino or Chicano or recent Mexican immigrant culture, education, and language use---but none at all that I could find on Mexican minorities coming to the United States, and their use of their *native* languages here. It seems that part of the reason might be political: the United States needs to think of Mexican immigrants as one or two (legal vs. illegal) categories in order to build policy around the,,

and Mexico is trying to unify, thus choosing to portray---and impose---a national, 'Mexican' identity (Hernandez-Castillo 2001).

But pinning it all down to political reasons robs the indigenous Mexican minority immigrants of agency and social self-determination. After all, these are people who chose to immigrate, who choose from day to day who to talk to, what to say, how to say it, and what language to say it in. They are people who choose how to teach their children and what to teach them, and people who choose how to dress themselves and their children, and what cultural capital to flaunt or hide.

It seems that, just perhaps, hiding their indigenous Mexican identity is intentional, an attempt at bridging the class gap between themselves and other Mexican immigrants. If Matute-Bianchi is right, and "the bonding agent in this community among the Mexican-descent people is their sense of sharing a common stigma as a low-status subordinate minority group," (1991), then it would behoove the indigenous Mexican immigrant to *not* perform their indigenous identity when seeking help from the Mexican or Latino communities.

However, according to Martina, at least some of these indigenous people are also forming groups of parents with their native language in common, and otherwise choosing to *not* teach their children Spanish, but rather their own native languages. It seems, then, that socially reproductive work may be being done by these families to preserve their

language and way of life, but by *markedly non-official means*. What does this mean, exactly? For one thing, that the parents are not in communication with the consulate or the educational system---both of which seem to think that they know what's best for the indigenous Mexican peoples in the United States.

One question that should be brought up at this point: should something be done about this failure in communication? Rigoberta Menchú said "they have always said `poor *indios* that can't speak for themselves: then many others speak for them'; that's why I decided to learn Spanish" (Burgos 1985:183). So should anthropologists be facilitating the intervention of the educators and the Mexican government in the lives of these indigenous Mexican immigrants? What if they don't want anything to do with Mexico anymore? What if education would be good for them?

It seems to me that while further study into the matter might shed light on the situation, it should not be done with the intention to facilitate intervention by either the United States or Mexico---it shouldn't be done with any sort of agenda in mind, for that matter. While it seems that the relocation of these people to the United States has softened their relations with those peoples of Mexican descent, it has not completely replaced the old hurts from years of mistreatment in Mexico, and so the social dynamic, although ameliorated by the newly shared class status,

is not going to be entirely friendly, or as much like a `family' as Matute-Bianchi would like.

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VIII. Appendix A: Interview With Martina Martinez

Martina Martinez is a teacher and my mother. She has taught grades from preschool through high school, as well as working in the ESL (English as a Second Language) program, being a teaching assistant for language minority students, and teaching adult classes for language minority parents. She started the *integrated* bilingual preschool program, and has since moved on to running a bilingual childcare service for kids ages 2-5 and taking on voluntary advocacy roles within the Mexican-American community. The schedule of questions is below, and the fieldnotes are attached. Note: the interview was informal, and as such the questions flow from one to the next (see attached.)

«Schedule of Questions»

Hola.

Que experiencias has tenido enseñando a niños con padres que hablan lenguas indígenas, lenguas que hablan lenguas que no son ni Ingles ni Español? (What experiences have you had teaching children with parents that speak indigenous languages from Mexico?)

PreSchool--  
Elementary--  
Middle School--  
High School--

Cuál es tu opinión acerca de enseñarles a estos niños Inglés? (What is your opinion about teaching these children English?)

Y qué tal Español? (What about Spanish?)

Cuál es tu opinión acerca de padres que no quieren que sus hijos aprendan Inglés? (What is your opinion of parents that don't want their children to learn English?)

Cuál es tu opinión acerca de padres que no quieren que sus hijos aprendan Español? (What about parents who don't want their kids to learn Spanish? )

En tu experiencia, qué puntos negativos tiene que el niño aprenda estos idiomas? (In your experience, what are the negative points of teaching kids these languages?)

En tu experiencia, qué puntos positivos tiene que el niño aprenda estos idiomas? (What about positive points?)

Qué más me quieres decir? (Anything else you want to tell me?)

«Response» (attached)

IX. Appendix B: Other Planned Interviews

a. Interview with Eva Pisano, San Francisco Mexican Consulate

This interview didn't happen. Every other person I talked to at the consulate told me to go talk to Eva Pisano, but she never answered my calls or called me back (see section on self-reflexivity). The schedule of questions that was planned is included below.

Also relevant were the array of answers I got from other people at the consulate: people who thought they weren't qualified to give opinions, people who thought they didn't really know the topic, people who didn't know if they were supposed to talk about the topic, one person who said they didn't know *how* to talk about it... It is interesting, since none of the people told me that they were too busy or that they did not want to talk to me (both reasons that would give the speaker more *control* over their choice to not speak to me).

«Schedule of Questions»

Hola, muchas gracias...

Me llamo Patricia --estudiante, antropóloga -- reporte acerca de lenguaje y educación, educación bilingüe en California,

Preguntas acerca de usted,

1a) Cual es su nombre? (What is your name?)

1b) Y su trabajo? (And your job?)

- 1c) Cual es su opinión acerca de la educación bilingüe en California?  
(What is your opinion on the bilingual education systems in place in California?)
- 2) Como cree que afecta a los hijos de padres que hablan lenguas indígenas, o que inmigran sin hablar español? (How do you think they affect the children of parents who speak their indigenous languages, or who immigrate without learning Spanish?)
- 3) Que problemas ve usted con el sistema de educación de estos grupos de gentes? (What problems do you see with the systems of education set in place for these sets of people?)
- 4) Y si usted pudiese, como los mejoraría? (What do you think could be done to fix them?)
- 5) Que problemas ve usted con la comunicación con las gentes indígenas en California? (What problems do you see with the systems of communication set in place for these sets of people?)
- 6) Si usted pudiese, como mejoraría esos problemas? (What do you think could be done to fix them?)
- 7a) Que más le gustaría decirme acerca de este tema? (What else World you like to tell me about this topic?)
- 7b) Que puntos cree usted que son importantes? (What do you think are the important points?)
- 7c) Que asuntos cree usted hay que considerar para entender y mejorar la situación de padres e hijos indígenas en California? (What points do you think one must consider when attempting to understand and better the situation of indigenous parents and children in California?)

Muchas gracias por contestar mis preguntas y ayudarme con este proyecto. (Thanks for answering my questions and for your help.)

Algunas dudas? (Any questions?)

b. Interview with Parents

Since I could not in good conscience talk to children for ethical and practical reasons, I decided to try talking to parents whose primary language was neither Spanish nor English, but some non-colonial language native to Mexico. This plan also failed, because I only had access to this demographic by proxy (Martina Martinez and the Mexican Consulate at San Francisco), and the parents I was trying to contact didn't trust the former while the latter didn't trust me. Again, the Schedule of Questions is appended (in English; the plan was to ask the questions in either Spanish or English, if the informant/interlocutor knew either---unlike the two previous informants, which I knew I would be speaking with in Spanish).

«Schedule of Questions»

Hello, nice to meet you.

What is your native language?

What part of Mexico are you from?

What language is your primary language?

What is your opinion about teaching this language to your children?

Do your children speak [your primary language]?

IF SO: Did you teach them? If not, how did they learn?

When do your children speak [your primary language]? (Response I'm interested in: when do you let your children speak [your primary language]?)

IF NOT: How would you feel about your children learning [your primary language]? Why?

Do you speak Spanish? (ask only if this interview isn't in Spanish)

If so, in what situations do you speak Spanish?

Do your children speak Spanish?

IF SO: Did you teach them? If not, how did they learn?

When do your children speak Spanish? (Response I'm interested in: when do you let your children speak Spanish?)

IF NOT: How would you feel about your children learning Spanish? Why?

Do you speak English? (ask only if this interview isn't in English)

If so, in what situations do you speak English?

Do your children speak English?

IF SO: Did you teach them? If not, how did they learn?

When do your children speak English? (Response I'm interested in: when do you let your children speak English?)

IF NOT: How would you feel about your children learning English? Why?