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Reflecting upon the Role of Memory in Meeting the Information Needs of Indigenous Mexican Migrants- The Memory Making Space of the Mixteco-Indígena Community Organizing Project (MICOP)

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“‘They’re Mexican, so they speak Spanish,’ the woman replied matter of factly. It turned out that the family spoke Mixtec.” (Semple, 2014)

On the final Sunday in June 2014, the sixth annual Guelaguetza festival took place at the Plaza Park in Oxnard, California. Co-organized by the Organización Cultural Oaxaqueña Ñuu Savi and the Mixteco/Indígena Community Organizing Project (MICOP), a community organization that seeks to provide social assistance to Mixtecos in Ventura County, the event showcased a wide array of indigenous dances being performed in colorful regional apparel to the sounds of *sones* and *jarabes* from some of the various regions of Oaxaca including the Mixteca and Centro Valle. *Guelaguetza*, meaning “mutual help” in the Zapotec language, honors the practices of cooperation and community through dances that capture the catholic and indigenous influences found in many cultures throughout Oaxaca (Foster, 2014). The celebration brings together musicians and food and clothing artisans in an effort to highlight the Oaxaqueño population currently residing in Ventura County. Although this celebration now takes place annually, it is the result of the loss and erasure of many aspects of Mixtec culture that have been forgotten or left behind in the migratory and resettlement process; often times in their place, feelings of inferiority or unimportance in the larger community take hold due to ignorance or perpetuated negative stereotypes that are commonly perceived of darker-skinned people. “We started this event because there was a lack of awareness in the community of the indigenous people living here and the fact that many of them are the ones who bring food to our tables,” (Foster, 2014, p. 5) testified Arcenio López, the executive director of MICOP in an article from the Ventura County Star. For Mixtecos, like other indigenous groups whose culture has survived centuries of colonization, the migration experience severely mimics prejudices like those they encountered in Mexico; the racism and discrimination against the Mixtec language and culture results in isolated communities, and has simultaneously reinforced barriers to resources in larger society. The diaspora is “plagued by extreme poverty, cut off even from other Mexican immigrants by difference in language and culture that have shoved them to the bottom of the social order here and at home” (Alvarez, 2001, p. B16). What is poignant is that indigenous Mexican migrants face a very distinct sort of ostracization, where others who are Mexican perceive Mixtec culture and language as below Spanish and the ascribed national identity, and those who are not Mexican at all homogenize them as any other Spanish-speaking peoples from south of the border. “I have been told that my language is no good, that my culture is no good, that I, as a brown-skinned guy, have no place in society. But when I’m here [at Guelaguetza] I discover myself and how great my culture is,” stated Gabriel Martinez, professor of Zapotec studies at San Diego State University (Foster, 2014, p. 11).

This paper will address the role of memory and collective identity in meeting the information needs of indigenous Mexican migrants in the United States through a reflection of the services provided by MICOP to Mixtecos in Ventura County as a preliminary site. Reflectivity allows for the intentional examination of memory in order to identify alternative meanings and patterns within past events. To begin, I will provide an overview of the migration patterns of Mixtecos to the southwestern region of the United States by utilizing academic research on transnational migration, and from this, identifying the need and importance of providing relevant information access. Next, I will reflect on outreach and services that MICOP has provided for Mixtecos as examples of the types of social assistance this institution has provided for its community while preserving cultural ties through memory. For the intents and purposes of this paper, *assistance* and *needs* will refer to the programs that address the social and economic disparities of Mixtecos and have been sponsored by MICOP in and outside of its institution. In addition, *culture* will refer to the experiences, artistry, skills, and knowledge of immigrants rooted in their country of origin. I will use similar evidence to determine how using living memory and collective identity helps organizations like MICOP in educating the greater community about their immigrant diasporas like that of the Mixtecos. Finally, I will discuss the importance of institutions like MICOP in providing a space for preserving memory in order to sustain the traditional practices and hometown identities from which members of the diaspora originate through organized community events and archives that support and are related to Mixtec culture. I will attempt to accomplish these goals by referring to archival repository material, including local newspaper clippings and event flyers, and transnational migration research to illustrate the presence and needs of Mixtecos in Ventura County since 2001. It is important here to recognize that this article is not intended to represent the full extent of involvement that organizations should or can have for the diasporic groups they serve. I acknowledge that the involvement I will be highlighting is only representative of the needs of Mixtecos in Ventura County within a small time span and is subject to change in the future depending on the circumstances of their community. Still, although this analysis has its limitations, the examples provided of the use of collective identity and memory can be applicable to any institution including libraries, community archives, or even non-profit social service institutions because it addresses how to approach the economic and social needs of diasporic communities beyond Mixtecos.

Community organizations like MICOP that serve immigrants must utilize memory to meet the information needs of migrants and promote the culture and awareness of these diasporic groups. In other words, instead of employing fixed notions of home and identity, organizations need to understand immigrants' "earlier existence elsewhere" (Hua, 2005, p. 195), alongside their relationship with the

cultural politics of their present home. Diasporas need to be acknowledged as fluid and changing with history, rather than fixed or pre-given (Hua, 2005, p. 204). “Along with other indigenous cultures such as Trique, Amuzgo, Mixe, and P’urépecha, the Mixtec’s unique language, art, and culture are in danger of being lost forever” (Mixtec History and Culture, 2014, p. 4) due to environmental devastation faced by the Mixteca region and the constant dispersal of people that has resulted from it; recognizing that few resources have been devoted on either side of the border towards preserving these cultures, MICOP focuses its services on helping Mixtecos living in the diaspora through the utility of their collective migration memories. Individuals who migrate to the United States attempt to make sense of the value and patterns in their present lives through knowledge and skills acquired in their countries of origin (Caidi, Allard, & Quirke, 2010); addressing this reality through the dual perspective of living memory means bridging cultural skills of the past such as native languages to meet the social or economic insufficiencies of the present. Similarly, “diasporic memory” (Lacroix & Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2013, p. 687), recognized as the result of a collective migratory trajectory, celebrates the persistence of their memory, while at the same time brings to light the problems that arise in acquiring information after arriving to their present communities. Utilization of memory, as Ahn Hua (2005) writes, can become a strategy for social justice, recalling the forgotten or suppressed events of conflictual and problematic histories, and deconstructing these issues in the community’s present realities (p. 198). Organizations serving migrants should utilize the collective memory and identity of these communities to provide for them relevant *information access*—communication of services in a manner that merges disconnect between their past with the present and in the language from their country of origin. Aligning memory with the necessities of the present helps to provide services for the diaspora that otherwise would be difficult for them to obtain, educate the larger community of the group’s history and presence, and/or encourages the continuation of hometown traditions from which the group they are representing originated. Institutions situated within immigrant communities are at an intersection that allows them to bridge the separation between the longstanding rituals and traditions of the past with the multifaceted environment where diasporas have settled. Developing community information by way of native languages and memory helps people cope with everyday living, and facilitates community participation (Durrance & Fisher p. v). Essentially, the objective of any organization seeking to address the information needs of immigrants through memory should strive to celebrate and advocate for equality in favor of the transnational identities of immigrant diasporas, all the while promoting the diversity of their realities existing now and historically within the greater community.

History

Migration to the United States has been an ongoing phenomenon and has been the result of various social, political, and economic events over the past few centuries. More often than not, people who migrate to the United States, either legally or illegally, do so in search of better economic opportunities in order to escape poverty, or to evade political turmoil or even armed conflict. Immigration has come in various waves from different parts of the world, but the outcome of it has always been population growth and cultural diversification. Indigenous Mexican migrants, including Zapotecos, Mixtecos, and Triquis from Oaxaca, have emerged as some of the largest migrant populations currently in the United States; according to a study conducted by Radio Bilingüe, a radio company based in the Central Valley of California, there are 150,000 Mixtecos in California alone (Torrens, 2011). Stephen (2007) points to cities such as “Los Angeles, Oxnard, Santa Ana, and San Bernardino,” as places where “Mexican-origin migrants have become either a majority or a very significant minority” (p. 77). Accelerated development in communication and transportation technologies have propelled globalization, and have given way for large corporations to take advantage of developing countries through avenues such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). U.S. subsidized agricultural products like corn were introduced to countries such as Mexico at lower prices than farmers in the country could afford to produce. The result of this was devastation of local economies and governments, forcing many to migrate to the United States (Public Citizen, 2009).

In *Transborder Lives*, Lynn Stephen explains how a history of U.S. policies have in fact encouraged an increase in migration from Mexico to the United States. “U.S. immigration policy in relation to Mexico and other countries has served primarily as labor policy - inviting workers in when they are needed and showing them the door when it became politically expedient to ‘defend’ the border” (Stephen, 2007, p. 145). As such, and in conjunction with post-9/11 negative images and fears instilled by the government of so-called “illegal”¹ immigrants, Mixtecos and other indigenous Mexican migrants have been coerced to live invisibly to the larger world. This anti-immigrant stigma is further perpetuated by the media through racially coded images which equate darker-colored skin and the speaking of Spanish and indigenous languages with notions of invasion and illegality. “Racialized readings of Mexican [indigeneity] and migrants as illegals, undocumented or not, result in surveillance from many people in the United States, from border guards to factory supervisors” (Stephen, 2007, p. 144). Mixtecos, who

¹ The word “illegal” is not a neutral term, which is precisely why it is included here within this context of mainstream immigration policy rhetoric. The characterization in legislative and regulatory bodies of undocumented peoples as “illegal” contributes to their systematic dehumanization.

typically come from smaller towns in Mexico, arrive mostly only speaking Mixtec (an oral language), with little education, and with only agricultural labor skills. Because of these barriers, many take up low-wage jobs in construction or the food industry (Semple, 2014): “They are day laborers and their bosses take advantage of them because they seem mute” (Torrens, 2011, p. 5). In spite of their barriers in the United States, the transborder experience of Mixtecos has only served to reaffirm their cultural identity. Understanding this process as *transborder*, instead of *transnational* calls attention to the overlap in cultural/racial/ethnic dynamics that have origins in Mexico within different groups of Latinos that are continued in the United States (Stephen, 2007). Identification as Mixteco by those of this diaspora bypasses nationalist consciousness that is traditionally associated with geographic space. This identity realized through the transborder experience is one that is understood by those within Mixtec and other migrant communities, but is little understood or paid attention to by those outside of their contexts.

Reflecting Upon the Role of Memory

The role of memory for an organization like MICOP in particular is born from the celebration of identity from which Mixtecos originate, as well as the necessity to call into question their current information needs and disadvantages. As described on their website, MICOP is an organization that unites indigenous leaders and allies to strengthen the Mixtec and indigenous immigrant community of Ventura County. The organization builds trust with the diaspora by employing a majority-indigenous staff and develops community leadership through education and training programs such as language interpretation, health outreach, and cultural promotion (Programs, 2014). As Hua (2005) mentions, acts where individuals and groups construct and perform their identities through recollecting a shared past helps to foster a sense of community. Self-reflective approaches to community building are echoed across similar organizations like MICOP that strive to help immigrant populations and call to advance the social, economic, and cultural rights of the communities where they now live and the communities they left behind (La Unión, 2014). Some strive to serve as clearinghouses of information, culture, and community resources in order to support educational institutions through relevant presentations (Mano a Mano, 2014). Organizing efforts that involve the voices of community members are pertinent to assure their rights are honored and they have equal access to health, educational, and social services. Participatory methods to gather information about specific needs that are not being met are being employed. Doing so is especially important considering that many “diasporic members frequently feel a sense of alienation in the host country because of systemic [...] socioeconomic exclusion” (Hua, 2005, p. 193). Space to voice community concerns is created through surveys and meetings that take place at MICOP’s

office. Specifically in regards to indigenous Mexican diasporas, the previously mentioned disparities indicate a cultural disconnect with the greater contexts where these communities are located; MICOP establishes collaboration with social service institutions that the diaspora needs. As Semple (2014) writes, “for those immigrants who have less than a working knowledge of Spanish and English, even basic services can often remain out of reach” (p. 15). Finally, the diaspora is heard not only by participation in the survey, but also through involvement in the functionality of institutions themselves. MICOP creates indigenous leaders and allows them to serve in positions from volunteers to board members. By creating opportunities for empowerment that have been historically erased from the collective diaspora’s memory, the organization promotes access into the larger community through informative, social, and economic services, and fosters more accurate representation of the community at hand.

Using Memory to Address Economic and Social Disparities

Institutions serving immigrant populations must use cultural memory to address the economic and social problems faced by these communities in the present. Collective memories and practices continue within these populations but not without resistance. Assimilative policies aim to homogenize society and wipe out traditional Mixtec practices. As such, community organizations must ensure access to resources and encourage the continued use of traditions from home countries in order to give life to legacies and pave the way for new histories. They must channel the embodied experiences of real people and the communities to which they belong to construct welcoming spaces for new immigrants (Halilovich, 2012). For diasporic populations that originate from rural areas of non-English speaking countries, gaining access to these sorts of services may be of greater challenge. Some Mixtecos in particular have difficulty attaining essential resources such as health care or adequate food or housing due to the fact that many who arrive cannot speak English or Spanish. Recognizing this reality, MICOP has worked to aid Mixtecos by drawing on the community’s memory to overcome existing barriers and establish *mutual respect* with the larger community that is fundamental to their culture. One of the ways they have accomplished bridging community memory to contemporary social services is through the Mixteco Interpreter program, which utilizes professional Mixtec interpreters to help local agencies better communicate with Mixteco clientele (Programs, 2014). MICOP has fifteen trained interpreters who have been certified by the California Healthcare Interpreter Association to ensure confidentiality and clear communication between doctors and members of the Mixteco community. Furthermore, the organization has worked to provide classes for community members to acquire basic literacy skills in Spanish and English, and communicate independently with other groups of people in

society. In the face of economic discrepancy and cultural differences, MICOP has provided for Mixteco families services such as the *Bebe Sano* (Healthy Baby) program that teaches the basics of baby healthcare while simultaneously training Mixteco-speaking community health workers to conduct the classes. The classes attempt to reach low-literacy learners through culturally appropriate curriculum (Programs, 2014). A 2013 survey of 1,000 indigenous migrant women living in Ventura County conducted by UCLA's Center for Cancer Prevention found that 52 percent participated in MICOP's community meetings, 40 percent participated in MICOP's Bebe Sano classes, and 55 percent receive food and diaper assistance from MICOP (Mixteco Community Needs Assessment, 2013). MICOP's goal of establishing mutual respect for the Mixteco diaspora and heightening consciousness of the community comes through these support programs. Awareness of the collective migratory memories has informed the development of these programs, and has been utilized to fulfill information needs by assisting immigrant communities through educative and informative models that cultivate skills that are valuable in and outside of their communal sphere.

Using Memory to Educate the Larger Community

In addition to bridging access to resources, the collective memory of the diaspora can be used to advocate for consciousness and tolerance in the greater community of immigrant groups. As previously mentioned, when stereotypes and negative perceptions exist about specific groups of people, they can create impediments not only to basic services but also reinforce racial and economic hierarchies that already exclude such disadvantaged populations. Educative campaigns, outreach events, and locally organized meetings, however, can serve as avenues for coalition building and be spaces in which issues historically confronted by a diaspora can be voiced and addressed. In an effort to deconstruct negative stereotypes of Mixtecos in Ventura County, MICOP launched a campaign called "No Me Llamas Oxaquita"² which sought to raise awareness of the use of the word "Oxaquita" as diminutive and discriminatory against Oaxaqueños (O'Leary, 2012). "'Oxaquita' (little Oaxacan) is used by other Mexicans to demean their indigenous compatriots who are estimated to make up 30 percent of California's farmworkers" (Esquivel, 2012, p. AA4); the term is meant to belittle the appearance and traditional practices of Oaxaqueños that "are often at odds with 'Western' concepts" and ideals (Mixtec History and Culture, 2014, p. 4). Launched in 2011, the campaign aimed to persuade school districts in the county to ban the use of the epithet on school property, form committees against bullying, and encourage

² While the literal translation is "little Oaxacan" it is important to note that is a racial slur regarding one's indigenous heritage and height.

integration of Mexican culture and history into academic curriculum. The resolution was unanimously passed by the Board of Trustees that same year. Moreover, MICOP hosts monthly meetings at two locations in Oxnard that attempt to increase Mixteco involvement in community affairs. The meetings focus on trying to integrate “culturally and linguistically appropriate educational services” (Programs, 2014) into schools, providing Healthy Start programs for Mixteco families, as well as developing collaborative relationships with stakeholders to acquire community needs through “el comité del pueblo” (Carlson, 2007). The meetings are open to all within and outside of the Mixteco diaspora. According to MICOP’s Community Assessment (2013), on an annual basis, between 200 and to 400 families cumulatively attend their meetings at both sites. Through practices such as these, MICOP not only created an inclusive and inviting environment for outsiders to learn about their community, but also preserved and put into practice the strongly held beliefs of cooperation and community tied to their culture. Recalling the persistent discrimination against Oaxaqueños served as evidence to bring change to the school system of Oxnard, and prompted the integration of tolerance building reforms into classrooms.

Importance of Preserving Cultural Memory

Lastly, cultural memory needs to be preserved in order to give context and connect members of a given diasporic community together through means that are reflective of the their interests. This could be materialized in the form of events that commemorate traditions, culture, and holidays with input from the migrant community that respectfully tells their history. In addition, organizations need to promote ways in which to preserve traditions and materials that may hold some significance to the culture of migrants, be it through a physical or digital platform. The goal here is to retain the memory of the migratory experience alongside traditions and practices of the diaspora that make these groups distinguishable in an entirely new context, and most importantly, highlight the continuation of the migrant group now and into the future. By making accessible cultural events and repository material, institutions can include the larger community and advocate for cultural competency with regards to diasporic groups. Nonetheless, how public their culture is to be made and how their story is told (what is remembered and forgotten) must be a decision in accordance with migrants themselves (Lacroix & Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2013). As mentioned previously, for the last six years, members of the Oaxaqueño community have come together to organize the annual Guelaguetza festival, which takes place in Oxnard every June. The celebration invites members in and outside of the Oaxaqueño community to partake in the day-long festivities and enjoy traditional dances, music, and food that are commonly found throughout the state of Oaxaca. Mixtec culture is also recognized in the

annual Mexican Independence Day parade in downtown Oxnard (Sanchez, 2008). In December, MICOP organizes a Fiesta Navideña, an event presented in both Mixtec and Spanish for Mixtecos and other low-income families, which provides them with a “pozole dinner, music and crafts, and gifts for children” (Davis, 2009, p. 7). Furthermore, organizations serving diasporas like Mixtecos need to incorporate the use of traditional practices at their institution to promote themselves as an inviting and inclusive venue for new migrants. MICOP has set out to accomplish this through the involvement of an almost entirely Mixteco staff who speak Spanish and Mixtec as facilitators to their services. In addition, the site has begun creation of an archive, detailing the presence of, and issues faced by, the Mixteco community in Ventura County, and the outreach events and services the organization has provided to bridge social and economic gaps confronted by the community. At this point, the archive incorporates newspaper articles, event flyers, and photos from events, but in the future will utilize community participation to expand the memory of the diaspora in Ventura County. All in all, preservation of cultural memory through institutions like MICOP must be a proactive movement; it must involve connecting members of the diaspora together through language and traditions and also provide avenues of fostering recognition of the memory of migrants in order to celebrate their presence in the larger community.

Other Considerations

While it is easy to make suggestions like the ones previously mentioned about how memory can bridge information needs, it is important to equally acknowledge the challenges that can potentially confront this endeavor. The looming pressure to assimilate coerces migrants to want to forget their native language and encourage their children to adapt more widely spoken languages. This compulsion contributes to the depletion of cultural identity and memory in the diaspora. Furthermore, varying narratives of migration also make it difficult for organizations like MICOP to establish services that can include all who are part of the immigrant community. Cultural memory is political because it embodies different stories, and demonstrates the “struggle for a place in history” since it “reveals collective desires [and] needs” of a community (Hua, 2005, p. 199). Alternate narratives of the past and meaning of migration can result in exclusion in the reconstruction of memory in the diaspora. Considering the nature of memory and its role in establishing representation for a community, “it is crucial to ask who wants whom to remember what and why? Whose version of the past is preserved and recorded?” (Hua, 2005, p. 200). As Eric Ketelaar points out, “There is no single collective memory,” only what members of a group experienced, but “they neither remember the same things nor do they remember in the same way” (Ketelaar, 2014, p. 136). Lacroix and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2013) add to this, stating that, “the

confrontation between distinct migrant groups from the same ethnic or geographical origin is a well-documented case of memory conflicts within diaspora groups” (p. 692). One question to ask from this is, how can organizations serving immigrant communities bridge alternate or conflicting narratives to foster solidarity within migrant groups? In this case, Mixtecos, who originate from a region that intersects three states of Mexico and whose language has numerous dialects, this could very well be plausible. Along with the pressure of assimilation, fear of the government may cause silence within diasporas if documentation is in question, and in turn, make it difficult for cultural memory practices like language to be utilized in order to provide social and economic assistance. In order to engage memory in the process of meeting the information needs of immigrant communities, it must not only be the present in the larger community, but memory must also be understood so that it may be utilized as a tool to break barriers towards equality and prosperity.

Conclusion

This article sought to reflect upon the ways in which memory, cultural practices, and collective identity could be used to breach the gap in information needs for immigrant communities. Reflecting on past events helped draw out cultural patterns and relationships between specific outreach events and the collective memory of the diasporic community. As individuals migrate to a new country, they use their knowledge and memories of the past to try and understand their positionality in the new context. Often times, migrants confront barriers grasping the social dynamics of the new host country, which in turn results in the search for people with whom new migrants will share common histories. An individual’s memory, crucial as it is to a person’s conception of self and their social contexts, is dependent upon contact with other people, especially through shared forms of language and identification. Understanding this, in order for public institutions like libraries or non-profit social service organizations to provide services to immigrant populations, they must do so using aspects of cultural memory such as language and with some knowledge of the population’s collective identity. Acknowledging memory of migrant populations becomes a point through which “social amnesia” is subverted when it is used between people to revive and recreate a collective remembrance of the country of origin (Hua, 2005, p. 193). The utilization of reflection as a tool through which to examine memory helps to aid these populations conserve particular cultural information about the migratory experiences of the diaspora’s past and navigate the present. Through a reflection of the services provided by MICOP, it was clear that by calling forth the memories and migratory experiences of Mixtecos, the organization provided programming and services that were indicative of the social and economic needs of the

community. Memory and recognition of the diaspora's historical repression by larger societies were highlighted in the efforts by MICOP to ban the use of the epithet, "Oaxaquita," in Oxnard elementary and junior high schools through the school district. Memory is also used in the formation of community events such as Guelaguetza, which brings to life the traditional songs and dances from Oaxaca into the diasporic sphere. Still it is important that there be conversations with members of the diasporic group itself to ensure that boundaries within their collective memory are being respected when establishing support that calls forth their traditions and collective identities.

By reflecting on past events facilitated by MICOP for the Mixteco community, I identified the role of memory in the efforts to achieve mutual understanding through outreach; if recognized by a larger community, it can break the cycle of silence that is often felt by migrant communities due to oppressive, homogenizing forces.

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