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### Transnational Oaxacan indigenous identity: The Case of Mixtecs and Zapotecs

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# Transnational Oaxacan Indigenous Identity: The Case of Mixtecs and Zapotecs

Michael Kearney

This paper examines cultural and political dynamics that result when migrants from indigenous communities in Oaxaca, Mexico, migrate to the United States. Forced from their homeland because of economic conditions and prevented from complete settlement and incorporation in the United States due to their "illegal" status and economic and social barriers, the migrants create and live within a third sociocultural and political space popularly referred to as Oaxacalifornia. The cultural politics of this third space are shaped by tensions between the indigenous communities and various instances of the Mexican state that attempt to retain political hegemony over the indigenous communities within Mexico and abroad. Central to the transnational projects of the transnational indigenous organizations is the construction of pan-Mixtec, pan-Zapotec, and pan-Oaxacan indigenous identities, which is a strategy with some contradictions, but one that appears to be effective for advancing the objectives of the organizations at this historic moment.

Key Words: Transnational Migration, Indigenous Peoples, Nation-States, Ethnicity, Oaxaca

Indigenous peoples from the Mexican state of Oaxaca, although deeply incorporated into California labor markets, live and work within settings where they are ghettoized and marginalized from both mainstream Anglo and Chicano society. Unable to live entirely

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either in Mexico or in California, many Oaxacan migrants instead piece together complex transnational migration and develop strategies whereby they exist in the transnational space beyond the territories and the legal and cultural domains of both Mexico and the United States (Kearney 1986; Kearney and Nagengast 1989). In response to their uncertain status within both nations' cultures, organizations of Mixtec and Zapotec peoples have recently taken the unprecedented step of forming large Oaxacan associations in California. Agencies of the Mexican state, in turn, have attempted to retain influence over these associations by nurturing their members' indigenous identities.

Of the sixteen groupings of indigenous peoples of Oaxaca, Zapotecs and Mixtecs are the two largest. Increasing numbers of Zapotecs and Mixtecs "illegally" enter the United States—primarily California—and live in a tenuous status. The Zapotecs reside mainly in the Los Angeles metropolitan area, where they work in the service sector and light industry, and in their own small businesses (Hulshof 1991; Klaver 1997). In contrast, the Mixtecs in California tend to be mostly in rural areas and to be employed as migrant farm workers (Rivera 1999b; Runsten and Kearney 1994; Zabin, Kearney, Runsten, Garcia, and Nagengast 1993). Furthermore, like the "illegals," many documented migrants who enter and reside in California retain close ties with their home communities, to which they return from time to time and otherwise support with cash remittances. Virtually all Oaxacans, whether migrants or those who remain in Mexico, are knit together into dense networks that span the Mexican-U.S. border and constitute "transnational communities" (Kearney and Nagengast 1989).

As used herein, the term transnational has two meanings. One refers to individuals and communities spanning national borders. In this sense transnationalism is "the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement" (Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc 1994: 7).<sup>1</sup> The second sense of transnationalism concerns political, social, and cultural practices whereby citizens of a nation-state—in this case Mexican nationals who are also indigenous peoples—construct social forms and identities that in part escape from the cultural and political hegemony of their nation-state. That is, certain cultural and political work of Oaxacans is transnational in this second sense in that they construct novel forms of political organization and elaborate cultural expressions of themselves as indigenous peoples that are distinct from the standard definitions

and expressions of indigenous identity in Mexico. These new transnational organizational forms and identities thus challenge the political forms and identities that are part and parcel of the hegemonic definitions that have been constructed by the modern Mexican state since its emergence in 1917.

Transnationalism in the second sense thus implies escaping from or otherwise surpassing or minimizing the power of the nation-state to control and form identity. Transnationalism in this second sense implies a liberating potential gained from escaping from repressive political, economic, and cultural dynamics operative within a national space. Thus, the argument advanced below is that transnational indigenous persons and organizations partially escape the cultural and political hegemony of the Mexican-nation state by residing to a great degree outside of Mexican territory. At the same time, as "transmigrants" (Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc 1994: 7) in California, they are not readily assimilated into U.S. society. Having this somewhat ambiguous status of being outside of and beyond Mexico and yet not socially and culturally incorporated into U.S. society, Oaxacan transmigrants thus occupy a transnational space that has cultural and political dynamics different from both the national spaces of Mexico and the United States.

Until recently, scholarship on nation building has focused on processes occurring for the most part within the boundaries of nation-states (e.g., Anderson 1983). But as Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc (1994: 3) point out, some nations with large out-migrations of their nationals are engaging "in a new form of nation-state building," whereby they extend their political and cultural hegemony into the extra-national spaces that their migrant citizens occupy. Thus national politics are carried beyond the borders of the home nation into the territory of another nation.

As transmigrants who are also indigenous peoples, Oaxacans have a relationship with the Mexican state that differs from that of non-indigenous, or mestizo, migrants. Indeed, the cultural and legal status of Mixtecs and Zapotecs has long been problematic to the Mexican government, which in the twentieth century has sought to incorporate them into mainstream mestizo Mexican society and culture. The dynamics of Mixtec and Zapotec transnational culture and politics, as defined above, have, however, lent new energies to grassroots indigenous projects that seek forms of political and cultural autonomy that challenge the hegemony of the nation-state and its assimilative project. Thus, among the large numbers of Mexican nationals who reside in California,

the Mixtec and Zapotec are a special case in that, as indigenous peoples, they bring with them cultural and political resources for identity formation, political organizing, and community building that mestizo Mexicans do not share. Most notable of these resources is membership in tightly bound, highly endogamous corporate communities that are the primary bases for the legal constitution of indigenous identity (see below). Most of these communities typically possess their own local variant of an indigenous language, as well as distinctive cultural traditions expressed in music, dance, and cuisine.

The political and cultural activities of Mixtecs and Zapotecs in the United States are not just a renewal of autonomous indigenous projects. They are that, but what is more, they also involve the innovation of new forms of political organization and new political and cultural projects. As discussed below, these new forms and projects are enabled in the transnational context. The space of transnationalism thus affords a certain liberating potential to Mexican indigenous peoples seeking to innovate grassroots projects for cultural and community development.

The achievements that Mixtec and Zapotec leaders have attained beyond the boundaries of Mexico pose a challenge to the hegemony of the Mexican state. Agencies of the Mexican government concerned with indigenous affairs have responded to these developments with new policies that amount to what Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc (1994: 269) refer to as "deterritorialized nation-state building." In part, these new policies are de facto recognition of the staying power of indigenous communities and the importance of migrant remittances to the mitigation of deep unemployment and economic depression in Oaxaca. The new policies are also shaped by the political orientations of the indigenous associations, especially those of the Mixtecs, which tend to oppose the ruling PRI party, the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional*, which for generations has been virtually synonymous with the Mexican State. The state's main means for retaining some degree of hegemony over Mexican indigenous politics in California is by means of financial and political support.

The major day-to-day points of contact between the Mexican Federal Government and indigenous persons and organizations in California are the numerous Mexican consulates located in Southern and Central California. Among other Mexican agencies that have been working with Oaxacans in California are the National Indigenous Institute (*Instituto Nacional Indigenista*), the Office of the Governor of Oaxaca, and the National Program of Solidarity with Farm Workers (*Programa*

*Nacional de Solidaridad con Jornaleros Agrícolas*). The current and previous two governors of Oaxaca have each made several trips to California to meet with Oaxacan indigenous organizations, which have also been visited by the National Directors of the other two agencies. Also active among the Oaxacans in California is the federal Program for Mexican Communities Abroad (*Programa para Las Comunidades Mexicanas en el Extranjero*), created by presidential decree in 1990 (Smith n.d.). Clearly, a dialectic of hegemony and counter-hegemony has been set up here, whereby as new forms of indigenous organizations and expressions of identity appear, the state responds with renewed surveillance, forms of co-optation, and other efforts to retain control over these ambiguous nationals abroad.

The question that concerns us in the rest of this paper is the dynamics of one dimension of Zapotec and Mixtec identity under the conditions of extensive migration within Oaxacalifornia, namely ethnicity. The basic argument presented herein is that within this transnational space there is a reconfiguring of the power relationship between the Mexican nation-state and certain indigenous communities in favor of the latter. One of the most notable aspects of these cultural dynamics in Oaxacalifornia is the appearance of ethnicity as a self-conscious sense of peoplehood among certain individuals and groups that live and work in this transnational space. Ethnicity, as I understand it, is not a primordial category given at birth; it is instead a constructed identity that arises only within relations of power and difference. The present task is to discuss ethnicity and political organizing in the transnational space occupied by Zapotecs and Mixtecs (Stephen 1996).

## CONDITIONS IN MEXICO

While there is some evidence of pan-Zapotec and pan-Mixtec identities in the pre-Columbian era (Spores 1984; Whitecotton 1984), post-Conquest Zapotec and Mixtec ethnic identity was fragmented into hundreds of local corporate communities created as artifacts of the Spanish colonial policy of indirect rule (Wolf 1957). This policy was designed to preserve indigenous populations as a labor source while also controlling access to that labor by Spanish colonists and Creoles who sought it to further their personal aspirations in defiance of the Spanish Crown. The formation of these closed corporate communities in the colonial period thus isolated and fragmented ethnic identities while also preserving and deeply modifying indigenous culture, society, and languages (Aguirre Beltrán 1953).

From the conquest to Independence in the early nineteenth century it was assumed that the indigenous peoples were and should be a separate caste distinct from Europeans and African slaves. But at Independence in the mid-nineteenth century, the modern Mexican nation was born as liberal, progressive social classes came to power imbued with ideas of nationalism and modernity modeled on the successes of the American and French Revolutions. Central to this project was the creation of a new form of social identity, namely the *citizen* which was to be the molecular unit of the nation-state. This ideal Mexican citizen would be neither European nor Indigenous, but rather a novel fusion of both, known as the *mestizo*. In the rhetoric of nation building, the mestizos came to be known as a new "cosmic race" (Vasconcelos 1948).

From its beginning this nationalist project was also a project of development, of modernization, for which the main targets were the corporate communities with their "backward," "peasant" technologies and their "Indian"—that is non-modern—culture and economy. In the mid-nineteenth century the indigenous communities became the targets of liberal reforms that sought to modernize them out of existence by incorporating their members into the young and modernizing Mexican nation-state. The assumption held by liberals was that these communities and their ethnic cultures would eventually be opened up and homogenized into the national mainstream.

These reforms failed, however, to "incorporate" and "modernize" the indigenous communities and instead seem to have furthered their marginalization, such that today Oaxaca, rather than "developing," remains one of the poorest regions of Mexico. Economic depression and environmental deterioration are endemic and much of the western third of the state, the Mixtec heartland, is basically an ecological disaster zone. Few of the hundreds of local corporate communities in the state have any appreciable forms of employment other than infrasubsistence agriculture and marginal handicrafts. Unable to make ends meet from farming and other local sources of income, circular and permanent emigration remain the only viable options for the majority of households.

In the last twenty years, tens of thousands of Zapotecs and Mixtecs have migrated to Central and Northwestern Mexico and to California and other areas of the United States to seek work, mainly as seasonal agricultural workers. To date, only one demographic survey exists for Mixtecs in California. Based on data collected in 1991, Runsten and Kearney (1994) estimate that at the peak harvesting period in

August there are some 50,000 Mixtecs in California from 203 towns in Oaxaca. Since large but unknown numbers of migrants cycle in and out of the state, the larger number of Mixtecs who reside part-time in California is unknown. Comparable numbers of Zapotec permanent and circular migrants also seek employment in the Mexican-U.S. border area and especially in California. Although no firm data exists for Zapotecs in California, I estimate that the numbers of long-term and circular Zapotec residents are comparable to those of the Mixtecs. Whereas most of the Mixtecs in California seek farm work, the Zapotecs concentrate in service jobs and in light industries in the Los Angeles area. In both cases, the structure of the economic contexts in which Oaxacans find themselves on both sides of the border in association with their distinctive cultural resources, including their corporate communities of origin, dispose them to form ethnic enclaves on both sides of the international border.<sup>2</sup>

#### CONDITIONS IN CALIFORNIA

Presently, California society and economy are undergoing major changes that affect the reception of non-U.S. immigrants and migrants. The primary industry in the state continues to be agribusiness, which produces an annual combined product worth around 28 billion dollars. While one of the most capital intensive agricultural systems in the world, California agriculture also remains highly labor intensive, with a continued reliance on foreign migrant labor that has been recruited at different moments for more than a century from different regions in the Pacific Basin. Thus a series of foreign nationals and colonial peoples have cycled in and out of California agricultural labor, e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos, East Indians, and mestizo Mexicans (Daniel 1981). Upon their entry into California farm labor, each of these groups was initially regarded by employers as more docile and productive than the preceding group, which with time became better organized and sought improved wages and working conditions (McWilliams 1939; Taylor 1981). Historically, most Mexican migrants have been Spanish-speaking mestizos from North-Central Mexico. But in conformity with the general pattern of ethnic replacement, Mixtecs and other indigenous migrants from Southern Mexico are increasingly replacing Mexican mestizo farm workers.

In contrast to the foreign farm workers that preceded them, the Mixtecs are arriving in California at a time when the California economy,

including agribusiness, is undergoing a restructuring driven largely by the globalization of production and marketing and by new patterns of immigration. For example, the labor intensive California citrus industry in which Mixtec migrant workers predominate in cultivation and harvesting is now competing in global markets with Israeli citrus harvested by Palestinian migrant labor, with Spanish citrus harvested by migrant Moroccan labor, and with the large Brazilian citrus export crop that is also harvested by migrant workers. Similarly, California fruits and vegetables must compete with comparable Mexican products. But whereas the minimum wage in California is currently five dollars and seventy-five cents an hour, the minimum wage across the border in Mexico is usually the equivalent of three to four dollars a day.

To remain competitive, California growers must reduce production costs, of which one of the largest is payroll. And here is where the Mixtecs migrant workers enter. They are widely perceived by employers as exceptionally productive, docile, and willing to accept low wages and sub-standard working and living conditions.<sup>3</sup> These perceived characteristics of Mixtec farm workers are shaped in large part by the high rates of un- and under-employment which makes them often desperate for work. But a structural condition that allows many Mixtec farm workers to accept low wages is the fact that wage income in California is often part of a larger transnational household economic strategy that combines it with subsistence production in Oaxaca and work in the informal economies in both Mexico and California.<sup>4</sup>

Since pre-Columbian times, indigenous communities have yielded up labor power in various forms to outside overloads. Their status as used and abused, poorly paid farm workers in California is thus a variation on the ancient pattern. Now, however, they are commuting two and three thousand miles to work as the latest group of foreign rural peoples to work in California agriculture. Moreover, they are coming at a time when the working and living conditions of farm workers in California agriculture are deteriorating, due in large part to pressures noted above placed on growers as a result of competing in an increasingly globalized industry. Furthermore, the abundance of migrant workers cheapens labor and induces many to develop complex binational strategies of survival (Kearney 1986; Schlosser 1995; Zabin 1992).

Many Mixtecs do escape from agricultural work in California by moving into low-paying service jobs and marginal forms of self-

employment. But the severe economic recession and high rates of unemployment that the state has been experiencing and their undocumented legal status severely limit this strategy as a path to upward mobility and incorporation into the "mainstream," which in any event has become a problematic term in contemporary California society, which is fast becoming a society of minorities. The point here is that while there are deep structural economic forces that partially incorporate Mixtec migrants into the California economy, there are equally powerful global structural forces that inhibit their full assimilation and lock many of them into a transnational underclass that occupies comparable class positions in both Mexico and the United States.

The situation of Zapotecs in Los Angeles is comparable to that of Mixtecs in rural California. The greater majority is employed in low-paid service jobs in the garment and other labor-intensive assembly industries, as well as self-employment as gardeners and street vendors. Just as California agribusiness has been adjusting to the pressures of globalization, so has there been a decline in Los Angeles of well-paying industrial jobs and a corresponding growth of post-fordist industries following strategies of flexible accumulation that rely on a lowly paid work force of "low skilled" immigrant workers employed in such jobs as garment sewing and other assembly operations (Navarro 1991). Another dimension of this restructuring is the growth of the service sector and the informal economy that is based on a large pool of immigrant, migrant, and poor U.S.-born job seekers. Typically, such jobs are those of janitors, maids, busboys, cook helpers, maintenance workers, gardeners, and street vendors. Such work typically does not provide sufficient income to maintain single income households.<sup>5</sup>

Just as Zapotecs in Los Angeles tend to work in low-paying jobs with few benefits and little chance of advancement, so also do they live in large neighborhoods of other foreign nationals who similarly struggle to survive in the same post-fordist economic niches (Hulshof 1991; Klaver 1997). Thus, quite in contrast to the assimilationist model of foreigners being absorbed into the English-speaking white U.S. mainstream, Zapotecs in Los Angeles have far more interaction on a daily basis with Mexican mestizos and other immigrants from Latin America, Asia, the Caribbean basin, and with African Americans. Similarly, Mixtecs in rural areas of California typically rub shoulders more with other foreign nationals than with English-speaking white U.S. citizens. Being relatively unexposed to "mainstream" culture

and society, they are thus relatively free to elaborate other cultural identities.

Not only is there little pressure on Oaxacans in California to assimilate into a diminishing Anglo "mainstream," the deep economic restructuring that California is experiencing is reflected politically in a broad-based negative reaction against immigrants, typically stereotyped as "illegal aliens." Recent manifestations of anti-migrant xenophobia are the passage in 1986 of a law declaring English as the official language of the state and the infamous 1994 ballot proposition number 187, which was intended to deny subsidies, health care, and education to undocumented residents. These exclusionary political reactions are in deep contradicition to the aims of the 1993 federal legislation enacting the North American Free Trade Agreement, which reduces economic barriers between the United States, Mexico, and Canada. To remain competitive in this economic environment of open commercial borders U.S., businesses must have access to productive, cheap labor, such as is provided by migrants and immigrants. Thus, as in Oaxaca, there are strong economic forces in California that promote circular migration and more or less permanent settlement. But comparable economic, cultural, and political forces inhibit the full absorption of these transnationals into Californian economy and society. Unable to exist as normal citizens or residents in either Mexico or California, Oaxacans are thus disposed to live in the transnational space that has opened up outside of the national economic, cultural, and political spaces of both nation-states.<sup>6</sup> The distinctive nature of this space is suggested by a popular term for it of unknown origin, namely, *Oaxacalifornia*, which implies both a fusion of aspects of life and society in Oaxaca and in California and a transcendence of them (see, e.g., Kearney 1995a; Rivera 1999a, 1999c).

## IDENTITY FORMATION IN OAXACALIFORNIA

To understand how indigenous identity has tended to become mobilized in the transnational space of Oaxacalifornia, it is instructive to look at how the Mexican state has *contained* indigenous ethnicity in the twentieth century. We will then be better able to understand the potential for transnational ethnicity to escape such official containment. Here I am using "containment" in a sense suggested in part by what Fredric K. Jameson (1991) calls "strategies of containment" in the field of cultural studies and also by Foucauldian notions about how official laws and regulations inscribe identities on citizens

of modern states.<sup>7</sup> These concepts help us to understand how the state creates social categories of subalterns so that, even as they resist domination, they reinforce the structure of their own domination. The most obvious such containment is the census categories by which the state enumerates people, thus assigning them to official categories. In Mexico, indigenous peoples are incorporated into a number of official state categories and organizations that also domesticate the potential disruptive power of ethnicity to assert identity (see below).

The argument is this: in order for ethnicity to emerge it must escape the containment imposed on it by the state. In the case of the Zapotecs and Mixtecs, transnational migration is a liberating experience in that it makes possible several kinds of *displacements*. First of all there is the physical displacement to another national space, where the heavy hand of the Mexican state is less able to exert its domination. But Mixtec migration is also associated with several displacements into different discursive fields. In Oaxaca and in Mexico in general there are three political fields in which indigenous peoples can protect their economic and cultural interests. These are respectively, *peasant*, *proletarian*, and *urban* political spaces. However, in each of these fields, Mixtecs and Zapotecs are severely disadvantaged, because all three are well organized and dominated by the state precisely for the purpose of controlling indigenous identities, that is by containing them to these limited fields. In what sense do these fields contain identities so that they are non-liberating? To explore this we have to dissect the multiple identities of Oaxacans in the greater transnational space, and it is cogent to do so in terms of human rights.<sup>8</sup>

Let us look first at the human rights of Oaxacans in relation to the most fundamental of "peasant issues," land. Here I refer to the assassination, torture, disappearance, and intimidation of indigenous leaders, which usually can be understood within the context of disputes over natural resources, especially land, the most basic resource of the "peasant." Such conflicts take place within almost feudal-like rural bossism, which links local relations of domination and intimidation to the repressive power of the state as it is expressed at the regional, state, and federal levels. In the face of this monolithic power structure, the "peasants" (*campesinos*) of a local community find it difficult to organize popular regional organizations to resist the domination of the state on any but the local level, because social identity in rural Oaxaca since pre-Columbian times has been primarily based in one's home community. The hundreds of such small corporate

communities, each with considerable autonomy in its internal affairs, are surrounded by like communities, and are thus disposed to boundary disputes and conflicts over land, forests, water, and other natural resources. Inter-community hostilities, unsurprisingly, are rampant in Oaxaca and they help to constitute the mosaic of autonomous communities, each of which has elaborated its distinctive set of totemic icons venerated in complex ceremonial systems. What is more, the marked vertical ordering of Mexican political culture also works against horizontal integration. In conflicts among neighboring communities, for example, all contestants seek redress in higher-level government arenas, and in doing so reinforce the vertical structuring of politics at the expense of common horizontal interests. Inter-community conflicts are rarely resolved at the state level, so that, left to foment, they further inhibit regional grassroots organization (Dennis 1987). The fundamental "peasant issue," i.e., the politics of land, has thus not served as a basis for viable popular organizing for the defense of human rights in the Mixteca.

A second major arena in which the human rights of Mixtecs are violated is in the large agro-export enclaves in the states of Sinaloa and Baja California Norte, where Mixtec migrants constitute the great majority of the labor force. Human rights abuses there are associated with the abysmal working and living conditions to which Mixtec agricultural workers are subjected: pesticide poisoning, overwork, slave wages, dangerous conditions, debt peonage, and so forth, which have caused Mixtec-led independent farm labor unions to organize Mixtec migrant workers as rural "proletarians" to defend themselves (Garduño, García, and Morán 1989; Nagengast, Stavenhagen, and Kearney 1992; Wright 1990). But these independent unions face enormous opposition. Just as one bureaucracy of the state constitutes rural "peasant" communes in a patchwork of distinct warring communities, so has another assumed responsibility for constituting and thus containing the organizational expression of rural agricultural workers. In Northwest Mexican export agriculture, this mission is fulfilled by an official union, the *Confederación de Trabajadores de México*. Union membership is a requirement to work in Mexico, and the government perennially finds pretexts to refuse to register any independent Mixtec led union. Workers are therefore forced to join and pay dues to the official union, thus obviating any attempts by Mixtecs to defend themselves and other indigenous farm workers. This bureaucratic control is amply supplemented, moreover, by co-option and violence. Growers and agents of the

state, in other words, have bought off, killed off, or otherwise neutralized grassroots agricultural labor leaders. As a result of the failures of this syndicalist strategy of defense, a significant proletarian identity and consciousness has never emerged among the Mixtec migrant agricultural workers.

Nonetheless, the experience of being thrown into the fields and dismal labor camps has brought Mixtecs from different, often warring, towns together. In northwestern Mexico, the agricultural work force is sharply segregated by "race," with *indígenas* working in the fields while the better packinghouse jobs are reserved exclusively for mestizos. For many migrant Mixtec workers these conditions and experiences give them their first glimmerings of themselves as being distinct from "Mexicans," or from "mestizos," or "whites," as the case may be. Here they collectively suffer forms of abuse infused with a virulent racism not often experienced in their homeland. Also not inconsequential here is language difference. Although Mixtecs with different dialects are scrambled in the labor camps, the majority shares the distinction of speaking a language other than Spanish. The point here is that as Mixtecs migrate out of their homeland to work as field hands, they experience conditions that nurture a more collective and conscious conception of what it is to be *indígena*. Here are some of the first experiences of a collective definition of the *indígena* that disentangles it from the defining power of the Mexican nation-state. One indication of this transnationalization of emergent Mixtec ethnicity was a 1985 request by the Mixtec union to the United Nations to intervene on the behalf of "Mixtec" agricultural workers. Such attempts to *displace* dialog between newly emergent popular Mixtec organizations and the state to terrains in which the *indígenas* are not so disadvantaged are becoming commonplace and are central to the formation of Mixtec ethnicity.

A third context into which Mixtec consciousness is fragmented is the shantytowns of Mexican border towns where as "urban poor" they work primarily in the informal economy as street vendors, gardeners, and day laborers. For many Mixtecs, residence in border towns represents a step up from the plantation conditions of commercial agriculture in Northwest Mexico. But in this context they are subject to the abuses of municipal, state, and federal police; extortion is rampant and beatings and even torture not uncommon (Nagengast, Stavenhagen, and Kearney 1992). Racism has also reared its ugly head in the border cities, and as if the clock were being rolled back to the colonial period, the term *Indio*, usually qualified as

"dirty," "dumb," or "stupid," has become common-place. As in the commercial fields of the Northwest, Mixtecs learn that they indeed are not "whites," nor "mestizos," nor perhaps really even "Mexicans."

The relatively recent appearance of large numbers of *indigenas* in northwestern Mexico has created a new configuration between Mixtecs and the state for which there is no precedent. In the border cities, Mixtecs defend their rights as poor urban squatters by forming association that until recently have had few direct links with Mixtec *campesino* and farm worker organizations. In recent years we have watched these associations be intimidated by agents of the state or co-opted into its machinery. Their potential for human rights activism is thus effectively neutralized.

Now finally, a fourth fragmentation of identity occurs when Mixtecs cross into the United States, where they are assigned the status of "aliens," especially that of alien farm workers. It is in California that Mixtec identities are most ambiguous, because although *in* the United States, in the present anti-migrant climate they are made to know and feel that they are not *of* the United States.

Whereas the three Mexican contexts each produce Mixtec organizations with specific local objectives, Mixtec organizations that have been formed in California are functionally diffuse in that they address the range of problems that confront their members throughout their diaspora. The leaders and members of the California-based associations have thus fused together the grievances and political objectives of the three Mexican-side contexts with those that have arisen from their experiences in California. This is a notable political innovation that arrests the social fragmentation that Mixtec identities have been subjected to by life in the distinct four zones in which they exist (Rivera Salgado 1999b; Velasco 1999). Thus, whereas the political objectives of the three Mexico-side organizations are specific to their respective social contexts—viz., peasant, rural proletarian, and urban poor—those of the California organizations are broader. One reason is that Mixtecs in California bring with them—in their own persons—all the problems they encounter in the other three contexts, which are then added to those that they confront as "aliens" in California.

This range of political grievances is reflected in the list of binational demands that they make to the Mexican and North American governments. For example, at a recent meeting in Fresno, California with the Governor of Oaxaca, spokespersons for the various Mixtec Organizations in California presented him with the following demands: (1) effective intervention in land disputes between com-

munities in the Mixteca; (2) prosecution of the assassins of farm worker organizers in Baja California; (3) an end to police torture and extortion against Mixtecs in Border Cities; (4) an end to extortion by customs officials; (5) prevention of theft by postal and telegraph office workers of money remitted from California to Oaxaca; (6) effective promotion by the state of community development projects in the Mixteca; (7) intervention by the Mexican government in the cases of Mixtecs unjustly imprisoned in the United States; (8) legal assistance to Mixtecs accused of crimes in the United States; (9) intervention with the U.S. government to stop human rights abuses, including killing, of migrant Mixtecs by the U.S. Border Patrol.

Now the activities of the associations are similarly broad and meet the needs of complex transnational Mixtec identities. These activities include: (1) improving the working and living conditions of migrants, many of whom live under worse conditions in the fields, orchards, and rural slums of California than they do in Mexico; (2) legal defense (frequently miscarriages of justice, several cases of which have become notorious, have made legal defense a priority for the Mixtec organizations—one especially notable case is the recent federal prosecution of employers in Ventura County charged with holding Zapotec and Mixtec workers in virtual slavery); (3) Education (the main concerns here are relations with schools that Mixtec children attend); and finally, (4) promotion of Mixtec Culture and identity by means of the formation of musical bands, dance groups, and the playing of an indigenous ball game known as the *pelota mixteca*.

Thus the Mixtec associations in California are now intentionally elaborating this pan-Mixtec identity, which has the advantage of encompassing all the fragmented identities into which post-Conquest history has shattered "the Mixtec." Now another cultural innovation of these organizations is to define their purpose. And here it is necessary to define a purpose that is comparable in its breadth to the vision of a people. This general purpose is attained in large part by the additive effect of the combined purposes of the other three kinds of organizations that are all brought together in the California associations under one general rubric, and this is the rubric of human rights. The point here is that such grassroots defense of human rights is of necessity predicated on a co-existing sense of ethnicity. For it is ethnicity that is the basis of the definition of the community whose human rights are being defended.

Human rights as an idea informing political action has only recently appeared in Mixtec political discourse, just as the ideas and senti-

ments of a pan-Mixtec identity have only recently emerged. This emerging saliency of human rights among indigenous peoples in Mexico is due in large part of the effective work of NGOs such as the Mexican Academy of Human Rights and Amnesty International, which have brought the concept of human rights into popular consciousness. There is here a dialectic of displacement of indigenous politics to a new field of struggle—the arena of human rights. The other member of this dialectic is the subsequent attempts at containment by the state, which enters into dialog and takes actions concerning human rights and in doing so gives its official stamp of approval to “human rights” as a legitimate discourse within which to conduct politics. Forced to recognize the violation of human rights officially as a problem, the state opens spaces for action against such violations. Thus the state, a major perpetrator of human rights abuses, by engaging in “damage control,” promotes yet further dialog about human rights. The most notable response of the state to accusations of human rights abuses was the appointment by former President Salinas de Gotari of an Attorney General for Human Rights and a Human Rights Commission, as well as the formation of parallel structures in each state of the Republic. The state has thus opened a political and cultural space in which indigenous people can assert their rights not only as individuals, but also collectively as *peoples*. Within this space there is the possibility for a synergy between an awareness of human rights as a dimension of identity and emergent identities as peoples.

To be indigenus is almost synonymous with being a victim of human rights abuses. But a different sociology of abuse and defense is implied by the emergence of ethnicity out of an indigenous base. For while an indigenous identity is basically a cultural identity ascribed to “indigenous” peoples by non-indigenous peoples, ethnicity is a form of self-identification that emerges from opposition, conflict, and self-defense. Thus when human rights and their auto-defense enter into the consciousness of an ethnic group, such a human rights project becomes a shaping force in the social construction of that community. In strategizing human rights work within subaltern communities, it is important to recall this distinction between “indigenous” communities as officially identified versus communities constituted out of ethnicity, for a practical anthropology is only possible in the latter.

But there is a contradiction in basing a defense of indigenous human rights on Mixtec ethnicity, or any other kind of ethnicity for that matter,

and that is that such a strategy tends not only to promote the construction of ethnicity, but also to constitute it socially and thus promote enclavement. Thus, even as the community's cultural resources for auto-defense are promoted, so also is the community so formed made yet a more visible target of abuse. Ethnicity thus cuts both ways: even while it is a cultural and political resource for self-defense and self-determination, so also is it a potential stigma. This dynamic of defense and stigma is one of the dialectics of ethnicity that at this historic moment is quite active within the Mixtec and Zapotec transnational communities, where both ethnicity and human rights activism are growing in tandem.<sup>9</sup>

Whereas *resistance* is correctly defined as micro struggles over forms of economic value, the kind of cultural politics that is waged in the arena of Mixtec and Zapotec ethnicity is also a struggle over what Bourdieu would call symbolic capital. A major political task of the Mixtec associations is generating symbolic capital (ethnicity) that is negotiable in national and transnational political fields. At present this rather appreciable quantity of symbolic capital has given the Mixtecs and Zapotecs a visibility and public identity that is far more extensive than their actual organized political base. In other words, although Mixtecs and Zapotecs have considerable visibility, their public image does not conform to a corresponding extensive popular consciousness or mass organization. Thus, the transnational Mixtec and Zapotec organizations have recently acquired considerable political significance, which they derive in large part from being constituted as hyper-real *indígenas* in the sense that public images of them attribute more power to them than they actually possess (Eco 1983; Ramos 1994). Of central importance here are the print and electronic media, which in the last fifteen years or so, as a result of Mixtec activism and increasing visibility in the border region, have poured out a constant flow of reportage and imagery giving shape to and reifying indigenous identity out of an amorphous indigenous cultural presence (Brysk 1996).

The leaders of the Zapotec and Mixtec organizations have come to regard ethnicity as a major resource to be managed in promoting and organizing pan-Mixtec identity. They advance their long-range projects by converting this symbolic capital, acquired from the dialectic of human rights and ethnicity played out largely outside the indigenous communities, into social capital consumed internally in the form of political consciousness, organization, and agency within the greater indigenous community. This process of ethnic

consciousness formation is an inversion of Marx's model of class consciousness growing from within to out, from "in itself" to "for itself." In contrast, ethnicity in the Zapotec and Mixtec case is condensing in hyper reality, whence it is now reflected back *into* the community in formation (Kearney 1996: 178–181).

I have spoken of the four contexts in which Mixtecs suffer the violence and indignities of human rights abuses as if they constituted four different populations. But it must be understood that individuals move through all four of these disparate spaces and so experience in their persons multiple situational differentiation of their identity. The transnational migrant thus escapes the defining power of any single determining subject position—viz., as peasant, farm worker, urban poor, or alien.

## THE DETERRITORIALIZATION OF INDIGENOUS POLITICS

In recent years unprecedented organizational, political, and cultural achievements in the history of Mexican indigenous peoples have been obtained in California whereby local Mixtec and Zapotec organizations have joined into larger associations. For example, ORO, the *Organización Regional Oaxaqueña* (Oaxacan Regional Organization), coordinates Zapotec village based organizations in Los Angeles. In 1992 ORO joined with three California based Mixtec organizations to form the *Frente Mixteco-Zapoteco Binacional* (the Mixtec-Zapotec Binational Front). ORO has since withdrawn from the Frente, but recently, Mixe, Trique, and Chinantec communities of Oaxaca and organizations of Oaxacans in Oaxaca and in Baja California have requested entry into the Frente, which accordingly changed its name to the *Frente indígena Oaxaqueña Binacional*.<sup>10</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The formation of the transnational Oaxacan organizations is unprecedented in the history of Mexican indigenous peoples. As discussed above, deterritorialized agencies of the Mexican state attempt to retain influence over these organizations by providing them with financial and material support. The state has thus entered into a dialectical relationship with the transnational associations, whereby in attempting to retain hegemony over its indigenous nationals in Mexico and in California it also nurtures an indigenous identity that is the basis of culturally and politically independent organizations

that escape in part the hegemony of the nation-state. The state thus, to some degree, nurtures that which it seeks to control. And on their side, one the main debates within the Oaxacalifornian organizations is the degree and forms of support that they should accept from the government without losing their independence. As discussed above, there are numerous arenas and ways in which this dialectic of containment and displacement are acted out.

## NOTES

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1. See Glick Schiller n.d. for an extended discussion and definitions of the terms "transnational" and "transmigrant," and for the distinction between "transnationalism" and "globalization;" see also Kearney 1995b.
2. For further discussion of enclave formation see Kearney 1986, 1995a and Palerm 1989.
3. These perceptions of agricultural employers are well demonstrated in the film *Invisible Indians: Mixtec Farm workers in California* (Grieshop and Varese 1993).
4. Re such "articulation" of different diverse economic activities in Mexico and California see Kearney 1986. Re the deterioration of living and working conditions and income of farm workers in California see Palerm 1989, and re the impact on Mixtecs in particular see Carol Zabin, Kearney, Runsten, Garcia, and Nagengast 1993.

5. For a review of anthropological literature on such economic restructuring see Kearney 1995b.
6. This concept of transnational space builds upon an earlier model of the "border area" as a place of ambiguity and labile identities (Kearney 1991).
7. Re "containment strategies" and "displacement" to evade them, see Kearney 1996.
8. For overviews of human rights problems of indigenous Oaxacans, see Amnesty International 1986 and Nagengast, Stavenhagen, and Kearney 1992.
9. The assessment that has informed the practical anthropology that I have been practicing in collaboration with Oaxacan leaders and colleagues is that at this moment in the history of the transnational indigenous peoples of Oaxaca, a project to build political and cultural projects on the basis of ethnicity offers more potential for positive than negative results. In other words, the broad-based solidarity that it promotes among distinct communities and the symbolic capital that it offers offset the potential ghettoization and stigmatization that is a potential negative result of emergent ethnicity.
10. The departure of ORO from the FRENTE was due in large part to an emphasis on cultural politics in the former and a more confrontational stance toward the Mexican government by major Mixtec leaders. These observations are based on participant observation in my capacity as General Adviser to the Frente.

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