

Article

Indigenous Reflections on Identity, Trauma, and Healing: Navigating Belonging and Power

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Abstract: Indigenous people are survivors of what some scholars have called the nexus of bio-psycho-social-cultural-spiritual intergenerational trauma. The effects of these multi-plex traumas brought on by European colonialism(s) reverberate into the present and affect Indigenous peoples at various scales, from local interpersonal relations to larger macro scales of geo-regional displacement. Indigenous peoples, however, have also survived the traumas of displacement, genocide, racism, surveillance, and incarceration by sustaining systems of ancestral and contemporary healing practices that contribute to individual and collective survivance. In this essay, I explore intergenerational rememberings of Indigenous identity, trauma, and healing based on personal, family, and community memory. Through rememberings, I seek to deconstruct the Western constructs of identity and trauma, arguing that these conceptions create trappings based on the exclusions of membership that support power hierarchies that perpetuate the dehumanization of Native peoples. By exposing these trappings, I will engage in my own decolonizing healing process by reclaiming, reconnecting, rewriting and righting histories. Finally, through an I/We Indigenous philosophy of belonging, I will argue that emotion can be an important saber (knowing) to help understand Indigenous identities as connected, collective, and ancestral ways of knowing and being that re/humanize Indigenous collective relational understandings.

Keywords: survivance; sobrevivencia; healing; struggle; trauma; mothers; movements

1. Breaking Silences

Historical and intergenerational traumas are said to be the enduring legacies of colonialisms and their impact on Native and Indigenous communities. As Indigenous people, we are the survivors of what [Beltrán and Begun \(2014\)](#) have called the nexus of bio-psycho-social-cultural-spiritual intergenerational trauma. These traumas are the result of hundreds of years of colonialisms and enduring power structures that have impacted and continue to affect the lives of Native pueblos and communities. These multi-plex traumas brought on by European colonialisms reverberate into the present and touch Indigenous peoples lives at various scales, from local interpersonal relations to larger macro scales of geo-regional displacements that induce mass trans-regional migrations ([Barillas Chon 2018](#)). Such displacements are not new and they have ranged from the forced labor migrations of Indigenous peoples under colonial regimes, such as for mining or harvesting crops, to current global capitalisms' extractivist practices that forcibly remove communities from their ancestral lands by means of international mega-projects such as hydraulic fracking or hydroelectric plants ([Urrieta 2016](#); [Batz 2018](#)).

Bringing historical and intergenerational trauma to the surface is a delicate issue and a double-edged sword because often the violence experienced is hard to make sense of in simplistic ways and when simplified can be used to invoke homogenizing tropes of a collectivized Indigenous victimization and powerlessness ([Kirmayer et al. 2014](#)). It seems like intergenerational trauma has surfaced as I have been working on a book project tentatively titled *Resurgent Indigeneities: Re/Making Indígena and*

Community through Education. The book is on Indigenous identity resurgence in Michoacán, Mexico, and is especially focused on a collective mothers' struggle for education that took place from 2005 to 2012. I began conducting the research for the book in 2006 and have been working on the book for at least the past five years. This project advances at snail speed, which often makes me wonder whether it is meant to be. Working on the book debilitates me because the responsibility I feel in writing it weighs heavily on me, *me pesa como una carga*. And it is not because my original enthusiasm for the research has waned. On the contrary, it has grown exponentially and my love for my ancestral community has swelled; but, working on this book weighs on my mind, body, and spirit. Why? I typically do not struggle with writing, but I cannot seem to move this project forward.

The violence, struggle and survivance I am attempting to write about in my work is complex, multilayered, multivocal and cacophonous (Byrd 2011) in my own mind and much harder to put out into the world on paper. The delicate musings about my portrayal of my pueblo and the mothers sometimes weigh heavily on me. Will this book ever see the light of day? Who will read it and why? What will they do with this information? That is still unknown, even to me. These resurfacing questions, which can also be called "academic dilemmas" for researchers of color and Indigenous scholars writing about their/our own communities, are precisely what weighs heavily on me. These dilemmas are ever present as I continue to read, engage, and write my study, the book, my family, my friends, compadres, comadres, and community into text. With each new conversation as well as each new archive, I confront the pain and joy of our pueblo's survivance (Vizenor 1999). However, the testimonios of sobrevivencia sustain, motivate, and heal me in the process. Trinidad Galván (2005, p. 11), drawing from Vizenor, defines sobrevivencia as survivance beyond responding to the global political economy to include everyday cherished interactions and measures. I have learned through the journeys that this research and book has taken me on that as Indigenous peoples, our individual and collective survivance and refusals of these so called traumas is immensely valuable and important. Although displacement, genocide, racism, surveillance, and incarceration continue, ancestral and contemporary healing practices that reconnect us also sustain and nourish us into our futures (Vega 2018).

This is not the first time I write about my ancestral pueblo—San Miguel Nocupetzo. What is the difference this time? The difference is that this work situates my ancestral pueblo at the center of an origin narrative and in the process, by default, it is also about my family and the people of my community, their ways of knowing and being that I now know more intimately. And yes, it is the intimacy that bears heavily on me and borders on the fear of betrayal, of breaking silences that are not meant to be broken, of re/opening wounds that are already seemingly healed. Part of the uneasiness in the book is rooted in the discomfort over writing about conflict in which there are at least two competing sides within layers of complexities. The mothers' movement I write about was violent in many ways and engaging the violence in a book brings out what some scholars have referred to as historical and intergenerational traumas (Duran and Duran 1995; Yellow Horse Brave Heart et al. 2011; Beltrán and Begun 2014; Garcia et al. 2018).

In this essay, I will explore intergenerational rememberings of Indigenous identity, trauma, and healing based on personal, family, community memory, and in part on politically engaged social research (Amigo 2019). Some of the memories and testimonios in this work emerge from my academic work on the book project. Others, however, have been part of my family's collective memory and have been passed down to me. Yet others I have lived myself as I have returned to Nocupetzo, instead of running away from it. Through rememberings, I seek to deconstruct the Western constructs of identity and trauma, arguing that these conceptions create trappings based on the exclusions of membership that support enduring power hierarchies that perpetuate the dehumanization of Native and Indigenous peoples through portrayals of suffering (Tuck and Yang 2014). By exposing these trappings, I will engage in my own decolonizing healing process as outlined by Smith (1999) by reclaiming, reconnecting, rewriting and righting histories. Finally, through an I/We Indigenous philosophy of Belonging in *comunalidad*, I will argue that emotion can be an important *saber* (knowing)

to help understand Indigenous identities as connected, collective, and ancestral ways of knowing and being that re/humanize Indigenous collective relational understandings.

2. Intergenerational Rememberings: *El Pueblo*

San Miguel Nocutzepo is an *ejido*-based, P'urhépecha heritage pueblo of 939 people according to the 2010 census (INEGI). According to Vásquez Castillo (2004, p. 3), ejidos were tracts of communally owned land that were inalienable, nontransferable, and non-attachable and were, until 1992, on formal contract between the Mexican state and *ejidatarios*, the rural farmers who owned them. Ejidos have historically been associated with Indigenous communal corporate land ownership. Located in the southwestern region of Lake Pátzcuaro, Nocutzepo is largely a Spanish speaking community. The pueblo is associated with indigeneity because of the racialized geography of the Lake Pátzcuaro Basin and because it has ejidos and maintains "*usos y costumbres*" (customs and traditions) traditionally associated with identifying Indigenous pueblos. When asked, the majority of the people of Nocutzepo do not identify as P'urhépecha due to language loss; however, some identify as *indígena* (Indigenous) and most recognize that they have P'orhé ancestors. Being Indigenous in this region has long been constructed as something negative due to the ongoing legacies of coloniality (Mignolo 2007), including of racism and exclusionary practices toward Indigenous people, and through the assimilation into mestizaje actively encouraged in Mexican schools (Dawson 2004). Internalized oppression, or taking on the identity of the oppressor and devaluing one's Indigenous culture and language, is also prevalent (Urrieta 2003).

The saliency of indigeneity in Nocutzepo, however, has varied at different recent historical periods. Groups that have at times embraced indigeneity in the community have not been consistent across temporalities. For example, many townspeople that opposed the mothers' Indigenous resurgence movement in 2005, were active proponents of Indigenous Instituto Nacional Indigenista (National Indigenist Institute, i.e., INI)-sponsored schooling in Nocutzepo in the late 1970s. In fact, when my father decided to return to Nocutzepo in 1976 after living in the U.S. for several years, I was enrolled for a brief period of time in the INI school where I first learned how to hold a pencil and to draw lines and circles on paper. I have fond memories of these early school learning experiences and was confused when my father abruptly stopped letting me attend the INI Indigenous school. When the short-lived school project closed, some community members went so far as to send their children away to Indigenous boarding schools after their efforts to maintain an INI school in Nocutzepo failed. Controversies over education before the 1970s, then, and now, like those with indigeneity, were frequently tied to political party alliances that led to very conflictive periods of violence, including my grandmother's death.

My paternal grandmother, Catalina Martinez or "Mamá Catita" died from a beating in 1978. While the Instituto Nacional Indigenista (INI) was created in 1948 to "assist" Indigenous communities in their process of acculturation through *indigenismo* (indigenism), the now defunct institution also became a political and, in some instances, corrupt bureaucracy, often pushing their own agendas (Hernández Castillo 2001; Saldívar 2018). Indigenismo, the INI's main ideology, as a state tenet and intellectual project for regulating Indigenous communities worked hand-in-hand with mestizaje and functioned not so much as a celebration of racial mixture, but as a state eugenicist program of racial whitening (Alberto 2016). According to Hernández Castillo (2001), Indigenous women's wombs became the epicenter of mestizaje. In the late 1970s, Nocutzepo erupted in conflict over the quality of education in the community in part due to INI intervention. The INI promoted their own schools in pueblos such as Nocutzepo by often pointing out the inequities of the federal schools for Indigenous peoples which further fueled the valid critiques some community members already had of the state schools. Some of the Nocutzepo parents' complaints of the school included that the teachers did not teach, that they physically beat the children, and that some male teachers showed up to work drunk or hungover. All of the teachers were not from Nocutzepo and nearly all of them were mestizo.

Nocutzepo, with almost five hundred years of experience with colonialism, was divided in the 1970s over the issue of the school and over political party alliances and remains divided today over its Indigenous identity. Even though cultural shifts over the centuries diluted the strength of P'urhépecha identity in Nocutzepo, the pueblo was homogenized by the INI as having a collective Indigenous identity because *indigenistas* (indigenists) wrongly believed that Indigenous peoples belonged to ethnic groups (Hernández Castillo 2001). As mentioned, in Nocutzepo, not everyone identifies as Indigenous. Intergroup oppression, different degrees of internalized racism and self-hate, and socioeconomic differences exist and create rifts. The issue of indigeneity, demands to challenge the federal school, and support for the INI school all became local contentious issues. To be “more Indian” was generally equated with being poorer or darker by some, whereas *mestizo* was equated with owning more land, being better off economically, and having lighter skin. Indigeneity has also been associated with political party rivalries, which also appeal to voters based on socioeconomic issues. Mexican political parties often courted votes from the collectivized “campesinos” (peasants), who they also sometimes associated with being Indigenous since the post-revolutionary period (Boyer 2003) by making promises, providing food at events, or by giving families cash or *despensas* (groceries). These “gifts”, sometimes also considered bribes, along with political alliances and campaigns focused on equity and resource redistribution (primarily land) tended to appeal to the poorer sectors of the electorate in the pueblo. Those with more land and wealth sometimes referred to as *caciques* (a Native chief, leader, or local political boss), often ironically *ejido* owners themselves within pueblos, tended to align together politically as well by disassociating themselves from being Indigenous, mostly to protect their economic interests, while perceiving those with less or no land to be more Indigenous; thus, essentializing and associating poverty with indigeneity (Hernández Castillo 2010). Although Indigenous communities are sometimes romanticized as homogenous and harmonious, socioeconomic inequities and conflict exist even within small pueblos like Nocutzepo. The heterogeneity of Indigenous pueblos thus only intensifies with such challenges; therefore, while some pueblo members embrace their genealogical indigeneity or Indigenous heritage, others because of intergroup oppression, or different degrees of internalized oppression, do not. In the 1970s, some townspeople supported the INI hoping for a better school for their children, but also seeking a redistribution of land, while others—accused of being *caciques*, sided against the INI. In the 1970s, Nocutzepo context *mestizo* meant less Indian, a complex and implicit claim to whiteness, but more of an active rejection of Indianness. While doing this research, I learned that my father did not support the INI and that is why he pulled me out of the school even though a lot of my cousins continued to attend.

Women were actively involved in the INI conflict, especially in voicing their support for the side they supported and, in the process, also engaging in verbal exchanges with their opponents. My grandmother, sad about the situation, took a bottle of holy water, prayed, and sprinkled it throughout the pueblo. She believed San Miguel Arcángel, the patron saint, would help drive Satan away. There is a legend in the pueblo that San Miguel dressed in his finest armor rides a white horse at night throughout the pueblo expelling all evil and protecting its people. My grandmother wanted the conflicts to end. Women that supported the INI believing she was casting an evil spell on them rounded up a crowd. Near the corner of a far, dusty street, she was surrounded and accused of witchcraft. Some of the women, about half her age, brutally beat her. That was where the story ended when I first wrote about it in 2003.

Initially, I led myself to believe that my grandmother was a victim, heir to colonial violence that divides and conquers, and I grieved with rage and anger for years. I guess I could have called that trauma; however, during my year doing research and living in Nocutzepo in 2009–2010, I found out that I was wrong. Yes, Mamá Catita was found lying on the ground by my aunts, Rosa and Leonor, who have now passed on to the next life, while several women laughed and spat at her, but my grandmother was not a passive victim. I came to learn that despite her age, she fought back that day because this was not the first time she had to defend herself. I was also told that in previous occasions, she never put her head down when confronted by some of the INI women at the communal *molino* (grinding

mill) and that when she was slapped by one of the women once, her automatic survival instinct was to *slap* her back so hard that the woman immediately withdrew. She carried herself with a lot of dignity.

My grandmother's beating did lead to serious medical complications. When my father was informed that she was on her deathbed, he took a bus from Los Angeles to see her. Incoherent, claiming to be surrounded by angels, she died smiling in my father's arms. Her burial was poorly attended due to the town conflict. I remember the *velorio* (wake), the four tall candles, the praying, singing, and the last time I saw my grandmother. She was dressed in a red *bayeta*, a *faja* (waistband), multicolored *huanengo* (blouse), laced *saco*, and the traditional P'urhépecha black and blue *rebozo*. I held my maternal grandfather's hand as the coffin was lowered into mother earth, while women wailed loudly. I learned years later that expressing emotion and pain are not subdued in the face of grief but encouraged as a form of healing. A clay water jar, a bag of Mamá Catita's clothes, coins, and a clay dish with corn and beans were placed in the grave. My maternal grandfather said, "*Para cuando llegue al otro mundo*"—for when she arrives in the other world. As a child, I did not understand what I do now, especially by embarking on the journey of taking myself back to the pueblo, but I do remember the suffocating pain and being told to cry to let it out. And I know now why it was important that I be there as a child standing by the gravesite. During my research and time in Nocutzepo, I have been witness to numerous burials. They vary according to age, marital status, gender, and economic power, but there are always children present. Sometimes the children sit, sometimes they play, stand, or grieve depending on who is departing, but it is always a simultaneous lesson in loss, grief, and healing in preparation for life.

3. Intergenerational Struggles—*Las Madres*

In 2005, a group of mothers in Nocutzepo once again shared a growing concern for and subsequent clash over education with local school officials. This confrontation was not a new phenomenon but was reflective of the history of inter-community conflicts and violence and the generational neglect on the part of the educational system. Thus, the group of mothers that rebelled against the school by protesting their children's corporal punishment in early 2005, consciously or unconsciously, inherited some of their painful memories of schooling from past generations through local contentious practice (Holland and Lave 2001). The first government school in Nocutzepo, "*Hogar y Patria*," opened in 1922. It was amongst the earliest schools opened after the creation of the Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP—Ministry of Education) was established in 1921. Throughout the 1920s, the school struggled with attendance and often threatened parents with legal action if they did not send their children to school. Between 1945 and 1951, the school was closed over students' absenteeism and lack of school personnel. During that time period, the local priest started a private school that only some children attended, until, in 1951, a public school reopened for all school-aged children in Nocutzepo under the name of "*Narciso Mendoza*". Eventually, years later, the school would be renamed *Escuela Primaria Benito Juárez*. While some community members recalled having very positive schooling experiences, some of the mothers I interviewed in 2010 recalled that as little girls they had their hair pulled right above their ears, as well as their hands hit with the peeled branch of a peach tree by some of the teachers when they did not answer correctly. Some recalled being humiliated by some of the teachers by being called *tontas* or *mensas* (dumb) and *cochinas* (dirty).

Like the Nocutzepo mothers of the 1970s, the mothers in 2005 asked for better teachers, the overall improvement of their children's education, and a safe bathroom instead of a latrine with rotting wood boards. They demanded an end to corporal punishment, they wanted evidence of learning, and in particular for a male teacher to stop showing up inebriated or hungover to work. It is important to note that the teachers at the school have never been from the pueblo, they have always come in to teach from elsewhere. The mothers' repeated requests for changes were systematically ignored and dismissed by the school principal, so they demanded her resignation. Some mothers reported that the school administrators laughed in their faces and asked them sarcastically, "Why do you want better teachers if your children will never amount to more than *macuarros* (construction workers)?" When

they sought out local and state education officials beyond the school, they were not well received either, if they were received at all. These forms of violence increasingly frustrated and angered the mothers, but also ignited in them a desire to organize and struggle for what they thought was right.

In response to the abject humiliation they experienced, the mothers gathered during the summer vacation and carefully planned a *plantón* (takeover of the school) that they executed on the eve of 24 August 2005, and that impeded the start of the new school year. They blocked off the entrance to the school with a *colectivo* (local bus) that one of the fathers drove, and they hung *mantas* (cloth banners) with written demands that the school principal immediately resign. Seeking out a larger public forum, some mothers were driven to Morelia the state capital by one of the fathers and they presented their demands along with 51 signatures in their support to one of the largest newspapers in the state, *La Jornada Michoacán*. The mothers and their supporters orchestrated a successful *plantón* but would have a long road ahead in terms of struggle to be heard. While they occupied the building, they organized watch guards, cooking teams, and met and thought about strategies to move their struggle forward. Together, they recognized whose strengths were needed where and they co-labored to maintain their focus on their demands. After weeks of holding the school building hostage, the women were brutally attacked by their opposition, both community members that did not support their efforts as well as by some of the school personnel, in an effort to end the *plantón*. Through physical violence, including by men, the mothers were literally pushed or dragged out of the school building. Some sustained serious injuries and needed medical attention. However, the mothers, like my grandmother, were not passive. They too fought back, including against men. One mother proudly recounted to me how she was slapped by the male teacher often accused of showing up to work drunk and who had yanked her son's earring off, and how she just attacked him back. She said she could not recall exactly what happened, but when they were finally pulled apart, she had a bunch of his hair in her hand covered in his blood.

As in many women-led movements throughout Latin America, the mothers' struggle continued even after they were disbanded and physically beaten (Stephen 1997; Hernández Castillo 2010). Trying several alternatives, the mothers were eventually left with very few viable long-term solutions. Despite their continued organizing and lobbying, federal rural education policies did not allow for the creation of another school in such a small pueblo. Finally, the mothers resorted to soliciting an intercultural Indigenous education program in the neighboring pueblo of Arócutin, recognizing (or confronting) their Indigenous ancestry. The mothers and families involved received support by a male local school administrator for a bilingual intercultural (P'urhépecha/Spanish) "satellite" campus as an extension of the Indigenous school in neighboring, Arócutin. *Nueva Creación* (New Creation), the new physically precarious school made out of scrap metal and other improvised materials, opened in 2007 with his support, but its creation led to continuing and ongoing conflicts within Nocutzepo over having two elementary schools. For some pueblo members, re/turning to an Indigenous identity or to bilingual intercultural Indigenous education was considered a negative regression away from the modernity of progress and development. Such rhetoric contributes to the erasure of indigeneity by casting it as backward, old fashioned, rural, and expired (Hernández Castillo 2010). In the midst of narco-cartel violence and with increasingly less land and less agriculture due to ejido privatization and a booming avocado industry actively seeking to expand production (Maldonado Aranda 2013), for others, *Nueva Creación* was an avenue to recuperate a "lost" heritage and prior notions of "a good life" (*sesi irekua*). Most important, to the mothers, *Nueva Creación* represented an avenue to ensure that their children would have a safer, perhaps more viable education option in the face of dwindling economic opportunities. *Nueva Creación* eventually became a symbol of resistance to the educational neglect by the government, external deficit perspectives of the community, and the encroachment of redefined local agro-export economies. The school was eventually officially authorized after years of lobbying in February of 2012 and *Nueva Creación* was renamed Curicaveri, in honor of the P'urhépecha deity of fire.

I must reiterate that the mothers' Indigenous identity resurgence is not coincidental. The mothers did not one day decide to become Indigenous women. Indigeneity in and around Nocutzepo, despite the language shift, has always existed in different ways and forms. The processes of cultural change did not completely erase the connection and memory of indigeneity that allowed the mothers to re/claim an *indígena* identity. The rekindling of *indígena* identity in the mothers' struggle is therefore complex, multi-layered, multivocal, painful, cacophonous, contradicting and healing, as are Indigenous identities in general (Cadena and Orin 2007; Martínez Novo 2006). Perhaps the resurgence in Indigenous identity is an outcome and not necessarily the genesis of the mothers' struggle? Perhaps it is both?

The Nueva Creación/Curicaveri mothers, however, did claim *indígena* as an identity and that is significant because it raises important questions: While the mothers' response to the educational neglect in their children's school can be seen as an example of how collective agency transformed a historically contentious practice [tense relations with the school] and enduring struggle (Holland and Lave 2001), is it also the basis for Indigenous identity resurgence in this "de-indianized" community? How is this struggle for education reflective of Indigenous community-based forms of *sobrevivencia* in a colonial context of neoliberal dislocation? Specifically, how and why does this reclaimed *indígena* (Indigenous) identity disrupt state structural constructions of officialized indigeneity through *mestizaje*?

In answering these questions, I develop the insights the Nocutzepo mothers' movement contributes to, (1) changing claims of indigeneity, (2) to emerging forms of agency (Ortner 2006), (3) to the importance of *sobrevivencia* in rural neoliberal Mexican agricultural communities even in the increasing absence of *ejido*-based subsistence agriculture, and (4) the role of intercultural education in rekindling *comunalidad* as a basis for indigeneity. Nocutzepo mothers' demands for better schooling through bilingual intercultural Indigenous education, based eventually on their claims to *indígena*, while simultaneously framed within neoliberal discursive formations of choice and opportunity in education, do challenge and disrupt state structural definitions of who is *indígena*, and upset Indian/non-Indian dichotomies entertained by social scientists and indigenists by creating an alternative space for indigeneity. While *mestizaje* in Mexico has always been perceived as a de-indianization process, an escape out of Indianess and a claim to Hispanic-ness or whiteness (Alberto 2016), the Nocutzepo Nueva Creación/Curicaveri mothers have reversed this to claim *indígena*.

Usually based on native language fluency and traditional attire, state officialized indigeneity would exclude the Nocutzepo mothers from being Indigenous because they do not speak P'urhépecha, nor, do they, for the most part, dress in traditional attire. Yet the mothers' claim to *indígena* as ancestral and genealogical while contemporarily marked primarily through their children's bilingual intercultural schooling in Nueva Creación/Curicaveri is significant for alternative constructions of indigeneity because it raises questions about Indigenous collective rights claims in the neoliberal multicultural state (Hale 2004). Namely, how does the current neoliberal context of displacement through land dispossession, narco-cartel violence, and precarity, such as what Nocutzepo has experienced, encourage changing notions of indigeneity? What do these new forms of indigeneity mean?

From a larger perspective, for the mothers, rather than being absorbed and erased through the nationalist assimilationist practices of the liberal state, they developed a multi-layered, multivocal, cacophonous, contradicting and healing discourse of indigeneity, that allows them to exist as *indígenas* and to enjoy some of the benefits of neoliberal multiculturalism, even without official sanction. Particularly in education, for the mothers and families involved in this struggle, it eventually meant finding for their children an alternative schooling and path to the few viable opportunities available to them in the local context of an agricultural community increasingly without agriculture, with a growing youth drug culture and local low scale drug economy, and with few local low paying jobs. An education through bilingual intercultural Indigenous schooling would allow them, in theory, access to coveted opportunities created by the state (ironically) to access higher education, including the local Indigenous teachers' college (la Normal Indígena) and Indigenous polytechnic institute in Cherán K'eri, or the Indigenous intercultural university system (Universidad Intercultural Indígena de Michoacán—UIIM), with open enrollments and free tuition for Indigenous students.

Agency, through the mothers' resistance, also became an important basis for alternative constructions of *indígena* identity because P'urhépecha identity still remained inaccessible to them due to language loss, and *mestiza* was not Indian enough to merit intercultural bilingual schooling. The mothers' resurgent, and perhaps maybe even "generic", third space or nepantla (Anzaldúa 1987) *indígena* identity, although controversial and maybe even problematic to traditional notions of Indigenous authenticity, by that I mean those notions of Indigenous authenticity policed by Native communities themselves, or even harmful to communities with stronger *usos y costumbres*, does however also challenge the discourse of the incorporated (disappearing) Indian by existing outside of the state sanctioned definitions of indigeneity (Urrieta 2017). *Sobrevivencia*, including strengthening communality and community control over institutions like schools especially through women-led initiatives, afforded the Nocutzepo mothers rights claims and opportunities, like the *Curicaveri* school, as a step toward remedying intergenerational educational neglect, and by providing another educational outlet for their children. Most importantly, the *Curicaveri* bilingual intercultural community school, strengthened by a sense of collective struggle, played an important role in rekindling *comunalidad* (communality) as a basis for indigeneity (Aquino-Moreshi 2013; Rendón Monzón 2003) for the mothers, fathers, grandparents, and their children. This space of *comunalidad* focused on collective *co-labor* (*faena*) to build and support the school, with local community knowledge as a basis for learning, and community memory, ceremony, and celebration as a basis for *indígena* identity resurgence.

Despite the noteworthy accomplishments for the mothers' struggle, I also do not wish to romanticize their story, and so I want to conclude this section with some important critical questions: how did the eventual concession by local authorities to authorize *Curicaveri* divert attention away from larger struggles of oppression? How did the concession of the *Curicaveri* school *clave* (permit) in 2012 minimize the potential for larger unified Indigenous struggles against neoliberal dislocations? How did the victory that *Curicaveri* represented to the mothers also "fix" discourses, identities, and people into regimes of governance (Speed 2005)? Today, in 2019, the Nocutzepo community still struggles with having two elementary schools with inadequate facilities. Benito Juárez, the original school and point of conflict in 2005, finally built new bathrooms in June of 2016, while *Curicaveri*'s metal sheet walls were blown away by a strong whirlwind on 14 March 2015. The school has since been rebuilt by the families and the municipal government has built them bathrooms as well. The student population at *Curicaveri*, however, declines each year with each graduating class. *La cultura cuesta*. Culture is expensive and most families do not have the financial means required to sustain the schools' programs.

4. Researcher Reflections on Identity and Healing: *Luisillo el hijo del Chato*

I previously wrote an essay in which I was trying to make sense of my identity as a person born and raised in urban Los Angeles, of Mexican undocumented immigrant parents, a descendant of a P'urhépecha *pueblo*, juggling between two languages, English and Spanish, but not speaking P'urhépecha, the language that I felt I should speak. In some ways, I was feeling cornered by the pressure of U.S. racism and identity politics to choose a rational label, in the Western sense. One to stake out a positionality, a social location. Too scared to pick up the fragments of what I thought was left of my past and culture(s) and too hurt to not speak about pain, confusion, and anguish, I searched for a way to work through these feelings and emotions and I wrote about my life, my family and my past. I wrote about my life because it was the story I knew best. I suffered because I felt the wounds of colonization from the dis-member-ment of my past, the confusion of that present, and literally from death; the death of my grandmother in community struggle.

As I worked through my reasoning, but most importantly through what I fixated on as trauma and pain, I came to the conclusion that all identity labels were inadequate for me. I wrote the following (Urrieta 2003, p. 148):

The reality is that identities are painful, contradictory, emotional, re/colonizing, endlessly searching seas of everything and nothingness, simultaneously. Identities sometimes do not have a word to describe them: sometimes identities cannot be explained, and in the attempt at explanation, identities also cry.

Indeed, I cried—and sometimes I still do. I was mourning. I was mourning what I thought were losses that could not be recuperated and failing to see what I did and do have. My grandmother could not be brought back to life, but she is not gone. What I failed to see then was how she lives in us and I also did not see the example of fighting back and dignity that she left for us.

As I engaged in my own decolonization process as outlined by [Smith \(1999\)](#) by reclaiming, reconnecting, rewriting and righing our his-, her-, and they-stories, I encountered the silences of my schooling. In retrospect, I felt the violence of schooling as a stripping of my body—that is not just a body, but a living collective archive of both colonialist violence and Native resistance, Indigenous survivance and resurgence. Romanticizing my P'urhépecha past, though, I lamented what was done through colonization and realized that the evils unleashed could not be undone. Through reclaiming, however, I also realized that the processes of colonization are not complete, they never were. Our survival is testament to its incompleteness even though the structures in place continuously attempt to advance the colonialist cause.

In August of 2009, I returned to my ancestral *pueblo* San Miguel Nocupetepo with the financial support of a Fulbright fellowship. I left with the blessing of the U.S. Department of State, on leave from my university job, and with a visa that allowed me to stay in Mexico beyond three months as a US citizen. I explicitly make it a point to highlight my privileged circumstances, not out of arrogance, but to signal the irony of my family's situation then as a mixed legal-status family because, despite these circumstances, we were not immune to the rigid US immigration laws that stubbornly deem some “illegal,” criminal, and deserving of punishment. My family and I left the U.S. together to stay together. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) together with the National Visa Center (NVC) required that our family be separated. Once again, the *raja*, the open wound, the U.S.—Mexico border that [Anzaldúa \(1987\)](#) so aptly wrote about was tearing our family apart. Even though the Fulbright was a prestigious award, it was not the prestige that I sought, but a way to leave the country together with my spouse and children. It had a completely different meaning for me/us that had little to do with prestige. It led me/us to *el tupu* (bellybutton), where life begins and where it ends—our ancestral home, *el pueblo*. The fellowship became another bandage to cover up a wound. A wound inflicted by the fact that national borders and immigration laws dictate exclusions, expulsions, and “authorize” us as people. In this case, my spouse was being banished, even though I am a U.S. citizen, and our children (3, 5 and 6 years old at that time) were supposed to be the “hardship”. I was to plead to NVC to bring her back “home.” Instead, we all crossed beyond the *raja* that separates, divides, cuts, and kills, together.

The blessing/healing part of this story was my/our return home—*al pueblo*, the place where all of my/our known grandparents are buried. The return was and was not easy. I am a known person, *Luisillo el hijo del Chato*, but I had also never lived there for longer than a few months as a grown man. Inevitably, I made mistakes and did not always fulfill people's expectations, but I also made lifelong friendships and reconnected with the land, our home, and our people. As a researcher, I must admit I was also confused. At times, I felt lost. This was due to me being an academic, being someone who otherwise lives in the U.S., and holds citizenship here. I realized that all of those things created barriers for me as an Indigenous person and created distance between me and my ancestral community of origin and yet, at the same time, this ability to migrate back remained key to re-immense myself in a particular place, to engage in, and re/learn the particular communal worldview of my pueblo. I saw this as an opportunity with the potential to disrupt some of the colonial apparatuses at work in my life and in both the U.S. and Mexico. At that point, I decided to let all my guards down and fully immerse myself in Nocupetepo's life first as a person, family and community member—then as a researcher. I learned a lot. I learned what it means to live in *la comunidad* and my life has not been the same since.

In 2010, when asked to reflect on my 2003 essay as a contribution to a collective volume on hemispheric indigeneity (Castellanos et al. 2012), I wrote the following (Urrieta 2012, pp. 332–33):

The streets have been paved in Nocutzepo and under the pavement were buried the memories of past decades. Although the past is being relived in recent pueblo conflicts over indigenous identity once again, no one remembers my grandmother as much as my 82 year old, unwed, aunt who wonders why she was left alone to live this long. Nocutzepo has grown and some things have changed, and yet others have not.

In Nocutzepo I learned that I was wrong, my grandmother was not a passive victim. I was told that despite her age she fought back on that fateful day. In la comunidad I had to interact with my grandmothers' aggressors because living in comunidad means to live together, in communion. Comunidad does not translate to community, it's more than that—it has no translation. I am no longer angry, I've learned to forgive; my spirit rests. The women who beat my grandmother are now old and sick. I see them with compassion rather than hate. The heavy load of their age seems like a debilitating burden, they are the elders now.

Through my research I've discovered that Nocutzepo is at least almost 500 years old, yet la comunidad is dynamic, it lives. Indigenous cultures are not just traditional dress or rituals, but every-day interactions and ways of being, *usos y costumbres*, that also change with time. In 2005 the pueblo was once again shaken with unrest, resulting in violence and separation—thankfully no one was killed this time. Ironically, the children (now adults) of those who in the 1970s wanted to distance themselves from being indigenous are now trying to rescue P'urhépecha cultural traditions through education. A new elementary school, bilingual and intercultural, was built as a cultural rescue project after intense fighting and struggle. The enthusiasm for re/learning the P'urhépecha language and cultural practices by this new generation is contagious. And even for those who oppose the new re/turn to indigenous identities, the hope is that with two elementary schools in la comunidad, one indigenous and one federal, the quality of the education for all of the children will improve. These struggles and conflicts over the years show that the community and its identities are alive and dynamic. Community conflicts are not necessarily bad; they show that people are passionate and willing to fight for what they believe in. My grandmothers' death was not in vain. She lives in us, her descendants, and in the community itself. I see her in my daughters' profound and innocent black eyes. I've felt her presence walking down Nocutzepo's dark streets at night. Identities cry, yes indeed, but they also laugh, they joke, they are alive in all of their complexities and full of sentient resources that often go unaccounted for (Castellanos 2009).

Decolonization, or this search for self, is painful. I learned about decolonization by living en la comunidad in ways that I would have never been able to had I not lived there. Nocutzepo's life and vitality, as a comunidad, despite the violence and conflicts, is itself a decolonial project. It is like a wild horse that refuses to be tamed; a horse that wants to ride freely with the wind in those beautiful landscapes. La comunidad's survival, despite continuous attempts to subdue it, is amazing. Knowing more of the history of Nocutzepo and the many different institutions that have tried to change it and to intervene in it, mostly from a cultural deficit perspective, over the decades, is also eye-opening.

It was not always easy to live there because I was not a neutral, unnoticed observer. I entered Nocutzepo, not only with my own personal history, but also carrying my family's generational history. Some experiences were hard to take; others will be like small jewels that I will value for the rest of my life. The overall experience was priceless. Decolonization is painful, but it's a necessary and enduring process toward healing that we must continue to fight for, not only for ourselves, but for future generations. Indigenous identities continue to cry, but they also laugh, they make love, they fight, they hope, they endure, they procreate, they live—we live. Our ancestors live in us, and we will live in our children.

Through this re/learning in la comunidad, I learned that my relations to others, not just humans, but also the non-living is an I/We and not an I/You relationship. Indeed, the individual in Nocutzepo did not exist outside of a larger family and community structure that did not just involve the living, but also the dead. People actively engaged in the co-labor of being a family member because these were/are not just honorific titles, but relations that require the work of *being* (Urrieta 2013). Comunalidad is key to community sobrevivencia in Nocutzepo because, despite the divisions, people *must* come together for the collective good of the pueblo. Nocutzepo maintains contemporary community service practices known as *faenas* from previous Indigenous institutions of collective community labor, or co-labor. Some forms of temporary and permanent collective services include rotating co-labor to benefit church maintenance and other civic or religious organizations through *cargos* or *encabezados*; through collected monies to pay for fiestas (*cinación*) such as San Miguel feast, Christmas, and Corpus Christi; and required collective labor for pueblo improvements and repairs, including churches, streets, water, and collective land maintenance amongst others. At these moments of coming together, people must overcome their differences, even their hate, put it aside and work side-by-side for the collective good of the pueblo. With few exceptions, unless physically unable because of illness or old age, all (women, men, and children) must be present whether it is for work or for a pueblo fiesta. That is the reason why so many people in diaspora who are able feel compelled to go to such great lengths to return home to their pueblos with their children for fiestas each year, to collectively recognize, to reconnect, and to heal with their pueblo (Urrieta and Martínez 2011).

5. Decolonizing Identity and Trauma with I/We Belonging and Healing

Finally, as a P'urhépecha and an academic, I want to revisit and critique the concept of identity as a Western notion centered on self-awareness and individualism. The Western relational aspect of identity often centers on the contrast between Self/Other; the Self often implying the Western center, while the subaltern usually the marginal Other (Sarup 1996). Identity work, when studying the Other as an academic enterprise as is often done with Indigenous peoples, is often thus devoid not only of human bodies but, more importantly, of human emotions and human lives because it has been built on subject formation based on exclusion and power (Urrieta 2003). In our recent edited book *Cultural Constructions of Identity*, we, Urrieta and Noblit (2018) conclude that the construction of identity as always premised on exclusion, what one is not, is therefore a Euro-Western set-up, an en-“trap”-ment for the maintenance of power hierarchies and the preservation of whatever is constructed as normative (i.e., mestizo, ladino, white supremacy, etc.). These trappings we argue are usually framed as either/or propositions and binaries such as Indian/Non-Indian, Native/Not-Native, that create exclusion of memberships, power hierarchies, inter-community violence, and the dehumanization of Native peoples based on notions of authenticity, often influenced by state regulation such as blood quantum, or requiring native language fluency for example. Intersectional analyses of identity, we propose, although they reveal more of the power hierarchies and name and critique the normative and other privileged “isms” in the backdrop in an effort to unbind the traps of dualistic identity constructs, is still partial. Indigeneity, as seen in the Nocutzepo mothers’ struggle is much more complex, dynamic, resistant, and multivocal than either/or constructions or intersections. Indigeneity must therefore be understood at multiple scales in its own terms, times, places, and temporalities. While there are general understandings of Indigeneity, there are also particularities that need to be accounted for within their own onto-epistemic cosmovisions that “identity” can only partially account for.

Similarly, in terms of historical and intergenerational trauma, Kirmayer et al. (2014) invite us to rethink the psychological and psychiatric constructs these forms of collectivized and conflated experience are based on and their impact for Indigenous peoples. They point to the particularities of structural violence and the varied impact and outcomes of colonialism on the diversity of Native and Indigenous experiences, especially the ongoing undermining of Indigenous autonomy, the expropriation of lands and resources through extractivist capitalisms, and the enormous economic disparities that exists even amongst Indigenous groups to highlight why a construct of historical

trauma collectivized and essentialized to all Native and Indigenous peoples and often compared to the Holocaust can be problematic. Most importantly, why the strong focus on trauma as an explanation for current social inequities and their consequences can reify victimization, deficit, and pathologizing views of Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing. In response to debilitating constructs based on trauma, Vega (2018) refusal of trauma by not naming her father, whom she reconnects with after a long absence, as an “alcoholic” is a great example of the recognition of pain/healing that is possible in relational ways, but also of the conscious rejection of the pathologizing nature of “trauma” that is often necessarily bred into disciplinary psychology and psychiatry constructs that are based on diagnosis and medicalization, even with the best intentions. While recognizing that colonialisms brought on historical violence and structures of violence that prevail, this must not be the only way we can understand and explain Native and Indigenous life. While recognizing the violence in the Nootzepo mothers’ movement and in my own family’s experience with my grandmother, theirs is not just a story of pain (physical and emotional) and struggle, but also a story of strength, dignity, women-led organizing, co-laboring, alliances, reclaiming, and sobrevivencia.

By using an I/We Indigenous philosophy of being, I argue that emotion, such as the encouragement to cry at burials and rejoice with loud shouts of joy at a fiesta, can be an important *saber* (knowing) to help understand Indigenous identities as connected, collective, and ancestral ways of knowing and being in *comunalidad* that re/humanize Indigenous collective relational understandings. An Indigenous philosophy based on a personalized exercise of, and reflection on experience, individual and collective memory, and struggle that explores being Indigenous based on our his- her- and they-stories of survivance is vitally important. Such is the experience of the Nootzepo mothers’ collective movement for a better education that began as a struggle for equity and fair treatment and has endured to become a journey to reclaim an *indígena* identity based on *comunalidad* and co-labor that sustains the pueblo even despite the divisions and ruptures of pueblo life. Through the use of oral traditions, the body as a historical collective archive, and yes even community-committed politically active social research (Amigo 2019), pueblo *saberes* (knowing) can help unpack colonial frameworks and discourses that are fundamental to re/centering Indigenous collective community knowledge(s) (Borunda and Murray 2019). Greater relational and ethical consciousness and responsibility are necessary for approaching research and scholarship on identity and historical and intergenerational trauma when working with Indigenous communities. We cannot afford to generalize and compartmentalize experience, despite good intentions, in ways that can homogenize and collectivize deficit perspectives, victimization, and pathology upon Native and Indigenous communities. Finally, to return to my book project, I contemplate refusal (Tuck and Yang 2014) and I am not sure how to resolve it. Will this book I am working on come to end? That is yet to be seen.

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