

Queer Indigenous and Latinx Histories of Migration, Love, and Meanings of Home
 by Mario A. Gómez Zamora

Setting up the Drop Scene

As a child, I loved playing to the *escuelita* with my cousins at my grandparents' house. Our classroom was an old room where all my uncles and aunties used to sleep when they were children, and the one that my cousins and I transformed into a classroom by using some old boxes and small wooden chairs. The walls of the room were made of thick clay bricks, and it had a roof a dos aguas, covered with sticks and long tiles where our cats used to hide and sleep. Right outside was a big and long corral with fruit trees, where we ran and played hide and seek. That was the space in which my vocation for teaching initiated. Since then, I knew I wanted to be a Maestro or Professor, as my grandparents used to say.

I remember that our teaching materials for our *escuelita* were the books that my older siblings used in the public school that most of the family attended, the Escuela Primaria Urbana Estatal Lazaro Cárdenas, located in the municipality of Tangancícuaro, Michoacán, where I grew up and my body received his first nutrients. When I had the opportunity to play the role of the teacher, I remember inviting my cousins to read or write in the geography and history books. I loved those books because the students had the opportunity to write historias o cuentos, as well as draw and paint maps. During elementary school, I had the pleasure of having two amazing Indigenous P'urhépecha

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teachers. These are the type of teachers you always bring into your heart, who I probably mimicked when I played to be a teacher with my cousins. They cultivated my passion for reading, creative writing, and what we call in the public schools in México, manualidades.

These two teachers, originally from the Sierra P'urhépecha, were Maestra Amalia Silva Hernández, who was my second and fifth-grade teacher, and my sixth-grade teacher, Maestro Lino Linares Francisco, who was my last teacher in elementary school, which I completed in 2002. Both teachers tried to foment their students' critical engagement with the course materials and teamwork, but most importantly, they created space for activities in which students had the opportunity to learn through the use of their bodies and imagination, which is essential in the Indigenous world. For example, I remember Maestra Amalia always considered me for participating in the folklore danzas performed in the school; she knew I loved dancing. With Maestro Lino, we made amazing manual projects. In his class, colors, paint, glue, rice, and wood were part of our daily curriculum to create manualidades, including a small key holder made of wood that we gave to our mothers for Mothers' Day.

In previous articles (that the reader can find online), I have addressed in detail my formal incursion into the world of teaching and research, as well as the influence of my P'urhépecha abuelo Enrique Gómez Montelongo on my interests for oral histories and Indigenous methodologies of talking-while-walking. Since I don't want to be

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repetitive or sound like a disco rayado, I won't cover those topics here. However, I consider it essential to mention that little Mario, who wanted to be a teacher, followed his dreams to become one. Notably, this kid didn't imagine he would end up teaching college students in California, but what can I say. I come from an immigrant family and my first teachers always encouraged me to expand my wings. Moreover, as a queer person, my spirit has always been calling me to expand my horizons and create a revolution to challenge the established norms. It has been the classroom, the place where I have brought that revolution. The classroom became my place to dream and create with my students the worlds we need with urgency, and where a pedagogy from the heart is essential.¹

Queer Indigenous Histories in the Americas: A Course to Imagine and Expand

The first college course I taught at the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC) was Queer Indigenous Histories in the Americas. I taught this course for the first time in the summer of 2024 as a lower-division course at the Department of Latin American and Latino Studies (LALS). The course's focus was the recovery of queer Indigenous histories in the continent of the Americas. The class occurred in an online synchronous format, and I developed strong connections with most of my students who, like me, wanted a world in which queer histories can have a dignified place in their families and

¹ My understanding of pedagogy of the heart draws on the works of Paolo Friere (*Pedagogía de la autonomía*, 1997) bell hooks (*all about love* 1999; *Teaching Critical Thinking. Practical Wisdom*, 2009), and Marlene Wayar: *Teoría Travesti Trans Sudaca*, 2020; *Travesti/Una Teoría lo Suficientemente Buena* 2021; *Historias debidas III: Marlene Wayar*, 2022).

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society in general. I will never forget, when one of my students asked me during our discussion of the gendercide of queer Indigenous people and the work of Indigenous scholar Deborah Miranda, “How much is enough, Mario? When should I stop explaining to my family who I am?” Another one of my students expressed his fear about losing the love of his grandmother from México once he told her he is gay. The sentiments and histories of my students motivated me to change the approach of the course. I wanted the students not only to analyze queer histories and the historical violence against queer Indigenous bodies, but also to have avenues to express their feelings and create the worlds they want. With this in mind, I decided to offer the same class in the spring of 2025, but this time in person and with a focus on creative writing.

On the two occasions I taught my class, I considered the needs of my students, their different ways of learning, and the political climate we live in and that continues oppressing and persecuting LGBTQ+ communities, immigrants, and other historically marginalized groups. The vast majority of my students, in both sessions, identified as Latinx or Indigenous and as members of the LGBTQ+ community. Most of them were children of immigrants from México and Central America. Many students shared they took the class not only to meet their requirements for the respective degrees but also because they wanted to be in academic spaces discussing issues that matter to them and their families, including students from STEM.

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What do Maestra Amalia and Lino have to do with my class and this journal's special issue? It is something that the reader is probably concerned about. Well, I didn't know how much I embedded their teaching approaches until one of my students who wants to be an Art teacher asked me in the last session of the spring course, "Mario, how did you think the design of the course? because this class was very diverse, we wrote, we painted, we curated and presented a gallery, and we collaborated with our peers." Then, it became clear that Maestra Amalia and Lino were really present in my teaching style and pedagogical approaches. I responded to my student, "Well, this was a class with a focus on creative writing and recollection of queer histories, those histories hidden or negated to many of us, so we needed to use any resource available to feel, think, and process those histories. Kindergarten and elementary students are always learning in different ways; why should we not do that as well? Also, this was a way to queer the class, no body learns in a straight way." My student responded, "I was giving up on my desire to be an Art teacher before this class, I thought that it wasn't for me anymore, but through this class, I have rediscovered that this is what I want to do."

Tejiendo Luchas en Común

This special issue is about the historias my students claimed via oral tradition, poetry, and other forms of art and creative writing. This collection of creative pieces is about the worlds my students want and for the ones they are already fighting for. In January of 2025, when I reached out to the *Label Me Latina/o* journal editors, to explore

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the possibility of publishing the work of my students, my biggest motivations were that my students could have a space to share their histories and art, and that queer children can find in these historias a guide and inspiration to draw their caminos de vida. In this edition, we have also included the work of some of my mentees from the Indigenous Memory Research Group (from the 2023-2024 academic year)² and the Queer Indigenous and Latinx Project that I co-funded with undergrads and an alumnus from UCSC (in the spring of 2025)³ to conduct oral histories and write poetry.

When I think about a class and its design, I visualize a soft and diverse land where trees and flowers of multiple colors can germinate and grow. However, cultivating the land requires nutrients and plenty of space, so those seeds we plant can expand with liberty. To achieve this, my students engaged with various fields, including Critical Indigenous Studies, Latinx Studies, queer theory, Feminist Studies, and Teoría Trans.⁴ They had the opportunity to put into practice the knowledge they acquired in class and their experiences of life in different formats, including the creation of free poetry, drawings, paintings, zines, and critical essays inside and outside the classroom. What we are presenting in this journal is part of the work some of my students and mentees created in different moments between the academic years of 2023 and 2025.

² This Research Group, of which I was the mentor, was part of the Migration, Identity, and Education Lab (MIEL) led by Dr. Saskias Casanova at UCSC.

³ During the spring quarter of 2025, we met biweekly with my mentees at the Dolores Huerta Research Center for the Americas at UCSC to work on their pieces. My eternal appreciation to Dr. Jessica Taft, Director of the center, and Dr. Kim Vachon, Research Program and Operations Manager, for letting us use the space.

⁴ Please review the course bibliography at the end of the article to learn more about the interdisciplinary work students read.

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This work is crucial for them and their families because it bridges oral histories from the community with the knowledge the authors developed in academic spaces. Most of the authors are children of immigrants, and all of them are the first ones in their families to achieve higher education. The work with the one the reader is about to engage comes from the heart of each of my students and mentees. This is a project expected for students' families and community members who contributed with their voices to co-create knowledge and *caminos posibles* with the writers of this issue.

Getting Ready to Receive the Artists

Maestra Amalia and Lino helped me to appreciate the art of teaching from the heart and how important it is to offer different learning opportunities, so students can discover their potential and fly to new lands where they can germinate with their *sabiduría*. I try to cultivate very similar values with my students and mentees, and this special issue on "Queer Indigenous and Latinx Histories of Migration, Love, and Meanings of Home" is part of the product.

The issue has four sections. The first one opens with a critical essay by Juan Carlos Cardenas about the corporatization of queerness and rainbow capitalism. The second section is on autohistoria, and where Sheila Alarcon, Itzel Arias, Anett Bautista-Gramajo, and Lesly Lagunas invite the reader to think about the meaning of home as children of immigrants, cultural identity and Indigenous diaspora, and how some of the authors navigate gender binary issues in their families as they embrace

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their queerness and expand the possibilities for Latinas in their families and communities. This section is followed by the creative non-fiction piece of Sol Cardenas, in which they reflect on the potential of the body to seek liberation from the heteropatriarchal system, and the history of their body and ancestors through photo memory and poetry. Finally, the last section has the creative and visual work of Nenu Cruz-Ramírez, where they provide their own definition of queerness, and the collage of Vanessa Duarte, where she brings an interesting visual representation of queerness, liberation and love among her queer kinship.⁵

As presented here, some of the works have been changed from their original format for the purposes of publication. While many of the original works included hand-made art and images, some of these have had to be removed to be publishable in this format.

Closing the Drop Scene

Here we are, standing in front of each other
 Standing in front of a world of chaos and constant transformation
 I don't know you well yet,
 But I can feel your warm heart and desire to revolutionize the world,
 Your world, my world, everyone's world(s).
 My queer heart is here to serve you,

⁵ This issue only contains the work of those students and mentees who chose to publish their final project. Other students chose other formats for their final from the variety of options.

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And to make sure you achieve your potential,
 That is not only my job but also my passion and mission,
 That is what feels right to me, every time I stand in front of you,
 Every time I see your eyes full of curiosity and desire to break the system,
 I know I am on the right path.

It is my job to take care of your dreams, and make sure that nobody hurts them.
 But it is even more important to help you cultivate your spirit,
 To help you cultivate those dreams that keep your desire for knowledge,
 That desire and same need I share for a radical transformation.

I may not live in your minds and hearts forever,
 But trust me, that each of you is already part of me.
 Because as a queer colibrí, I travel through lands, minds, and spirits.
 And by traveling in all those directions I also cultivate and feed my spirit.
 That is my mission: learning and teaching in reciprocity.
 And via movement is how each of you teach me and show me
 that other worlds are possible beyond institutions, time, and space...

With respect, care, and love for my students and mentees!⁶

⁶ Poem I wrote and read to my students from the spring course during the third week of class, when we were writing about our projects of lives and the call of our spirits. The intention was to provide an example of how they could write their piece to respond to the weekly assignment.

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