Introduction to the Current Edition

By Paul M Worley

During the mid-1990s I spent three summers working with "Hispanic" migrant populations on the coastal islands near my hometown of Charleston, SC, the first as a bilingual caseworker with the Charleston County Department of Social Services and the following two as an interpreter and teacher's aide for the Charleston County School District's Summer Migrant Program. As a caseworker working from behind a desk, I remember being confused by the apparent contradiction of the large volume of cases I processed (some 400 if I remember correctly) given that few Charlestonians, at best, were even aware of these peoples' presence. Still, when I was required as part of my job to go into the fields and help recruit students for summer programming the following two summers, I was completely unprepared for the true size and scope of the area's migrant population. If I had enrolled documented migrants over the course of the first summer, during subsequent summers I noted that there were at least five or six times as many people, documented and otherwise, laboring in the fields of John's Island and elsewhere. They lived in long cinderblock houses just beyond the tall vegetation that shielded them from the highway and passersby. Many of these so-called camps were accessible by short, barely noticeable driveways cut through dense growth. Although I was unaware of it at the time, many of these people, a number of whom eventually eschewed seasonal labor and came to settle on the coastal islands, as well as in West Ashley and North Charleston, were early arrivals on the wave of immigration from Mexico and Central America that would crest in the late-90s and abate only with the terrorist attacks on 9/11. Today they are as much a part of the warp and woof of life in Charleston and the US South as any other population to the point that when I returned home for a wedding in 2005, a friend of mine, a bartender who has never left the city of Charleston and who never attended college, addressed Rafael, a man with whom I was playing pool, in passable Spanish.

By opening this special edition of *Label Me Latina/o* with this anecdote I hope to highlight the degree to which the journal's title, as pointed out by several authors included here, is not so much a designation as it is a challenge. As with the situation in and around Charleston, SC, almost 20 years ago, and as it currently is the case in major urban centers and rural towns throughout the United States, some questions regain relevance if one is to ponder the social contacts and tensions arising from such demographic changes. Initially, one might ask how do cultures in contact respond to one another's presence. And particularly in the context of asymmetrical power relations and the overriding historical invisibility of a particular group, it is inevitable to reflect on yet other intriguing set of questions. How do peoples understand each other? How do peoples respond to assigned identity markers that set in motion historical ontological contradictions and yet enact a certain politics of representation? One could attempt answering these questions through analogies. Perhaps even by thinking somewhat ironically about "Label" as a term analogous to the act of naming or involuntarily and unwillingly falling into official demographic categories. However, "Label" in the journal's title is a command, but to whom is it addressed? Is the verb "label" a defiant answer to an outsider's query, a sign of resignation in the face of inevitable understanding, both, or something else entirely? Constructed as a "label" as opposed to a "name," what are readers to make of the term "Latina/o"? Most obviously by underscoring “label” as verb what becomes apparent is an inherent action that bespeaks a twofold agency. It can very well be a device to construct a new subject or a device to challenge such attempts. Yet, social political reality tells us that the term too often functions as a limiting mechanism deployed to repopulate a given social order. To paraphrase Arturo Arias’s observations on K’ich’e Maya Rigoberta Menchú and the representation of subaltern subjects, does “Latina/o” in this case constitute the very locus of enunciation from which Spanish-speaking subjects in the US must speak in order to be understood by the dominant culture (92)? As a “label,” it certainly conjures up the categories of race/ethnicity that are omnipresent in life in the US and yet “Latina/o’s” status as “label,” something affixed or applied to the outside of something else, simultaneously undermines the stability of any such systemization.

The present special edition on indigenous immigrants and indigenous immigrant communities is part of a growing body of scholarship and creative work that sheds light on the alternative narratives of migration and immigration that indigenous peoples present to homogenizing discourses on “Latinidad.” As argued by Lewin and Guzmán with regard to Yucatec Maya immigration, indigenous immigrants often have profound ties to the earth and their communities of origin (9), ties that thus distinguish them from immigrants who are more oriented towards national understandings of community and belonging. As such, the maintenance or severing of these ties is a fruitful place from which to begin an approach to the topic of indigenous immigration. The first two articles here, “Xujal runa’öj: The Moral Dangers of Transforming from Kaqchikel Maya to Latino/a in the US” by Joyce Bennett, and “‘Xib’e pa el Norte’: Ethnographic Encounters with Kaqchikel Maya Migration to New York near Lake Atitlán, Guatemala” by Tiffany Creegan Miller, articulate transnational aspects of contemporary Maya immigration from Guatemalan Maya communities. Bennett’s article is an important ethnographic study of how Kaqchikel- speaking Maya in several towns understand what it means to be “Latina/o” within the context of an indigenous community whose members exist in both the US and Guatemala. In doing so, she paints an ambivalent portrait of immigration and cultural shift, with one’s “becoming” Latina/o or being perceived as such a phenomenon that threatens the broader community itself. At least in this case, immigration and an identification with a “Latina/o” identity may be seen as fulfilling nineteenth- and twentieth-century *indigenista* projects that sought to convince indigenous actors to identify with the nation as opposed to a more localized ethnic or linguistic group. Conversely, in her article Miller describes how she, as a border-crossing US-based researcher, finds herself implicated in a Kaqchikel Maya-speaking family’s attempts to maintain a sense of transnational community. As she observes, in the face of a fluid Maya transnationalism that constructs communities across vast distances and political frontiers, if the designation “Latina/o” insists upon examining those communities’ presence in the US, does this not further invisibilize indigenous subjects and the agency they exercise irrespective of their nation states?

Shifting focus to present-day Los Angeles, in “Maya Migrant Youth in Los Angeles: Telling Oral Narratives on Border Crossings and Survival,” Alicia Ivonne Estrada considers how Maya youth use community radio to construct counter-hegemonic discourses on the immigrant experience, asserting a definitive public presence within the context of a violent neoliberalism that on many levels denies their very humanity. In her thorough analysis, Estrada describes how these youth draw upon Maya-textualities in their articulation of their experiences as narrative, challenging us to recognize these stories as grounded by a specifically Maya aesthetics and Maya cultural continuity. Finally, Erich Fox Tree’s groundbreaking “Diasporic Indigeneity: Indigenizing Indigenous Immigrants and Nativizing Native Nations” steps beyond the frame of twenty-first-century nationalisms to examine the interrelationships forged between members of Native American communities and diasporic Latin American indigenous communities in the US. In framing what he calls "diasporic indigeneity," Fox Tree describes how such a decolonial sense of identity across indigenous groups, "constantly scrapes at the armor of Euramerican hegemony by allying colonized people to offer continuing, perpetual alternatives to colonizers' claims of legitimacy based in force and in biased conceptions of law, truth, and justice." To a certain extent, formulations of "diasporic indigeneity" echo throughout the articles here as indigenous actors construct such alternatives as much through community formations with Native American groups here in the US as they do in relation to sending communities in their respective places of origin.

One of *Label Me Latina/o*'s profound contributions to the academy and the production of academic knowledge is its editors' commitment to sharing space with artist and writers. As such, this edition's academic articles are here placed into dialogue with poems, short stories, *testimonios*, and interviews by indigenous and non-indigenous peoples. Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muh's poems problematize the casual application of the word "indio" to indigenous populations in the "Americas" that began with Columbus, as well as the cultural ambiguities and similarities that exist across "Indian" cultures. "Recollections of a Native Daughter" by Jab'ellalih deals with a young Maya woman's defiant struggle to articulate a space where "Native ways are not just ways of the past, but ways for tomorrow" while living in North America. Julia Gomez Ixmata's poem (in Spanish and Maya K'iche') "No soy latina" reterritorializes what it means to be Maya K'iche' in the early twenty-first century, opening up a space for the assertion of Mayaness in the face of discourses that would render the poem's subject and the histories she embodies invisible. The multimedia short story "Yo no los maté" by the Oakland, CA- based Zapotec author Lamberto Roque Hernández explores the histories one may leave behind but never too far away "on the other side of the border." Histories that are drawn from the sediments of memory and illustrated in organic inks as a way of reestablishing a connection between narrative and the soil that gives it new life. In his interview with Leopoldo Peña, co-editor of this special edition, indigeneity, language, and belonging are explored in Roque's work. The two testimonial pieces by Ana Patricia Martínez Huchim (Yucatec Maya) and Manuel Felipe Pérez (Maya Achi) each deal with the transnationalization of the Maya communities and the assertion of Maya political, cultural, and linguistic rights through language classes and community radio, respectively.

As a final thought, I hope readers enjoy these contributions to ongoing dialogues and debates within the fields of Latina/o Studies, Indigenous Studies, Native American Studies, Latin American Studies, and American Studies, and, indeed, take up the challenges that these creative and academic works pose to each. After all, given the totalizing tendencies present within any given academic discipline, we are not remiss in persistently seeking out those whom any particular framework may marginalize or make invisible altogether. Moreover, it is perhaps an ethical imperative that we make every effort to understand such others not from within existing paradigms but rather from how such actors view themselves and their world, even as these views defy our own most cherished beliefs about the production of knowledge, the world, and our own place in it. Despite their different viewpoints and outlooks, I believe each piece here contributes to the formulation of just such an approach.

Last but not least, when first conceptualizing a special journal edition on this topic, I specifically sought out an online journal where the format would enable the publication of multimedia and multi-language pieces that, in recognition of contemporary indigenous transnationalisms, would be freely available across contemporary political borders. For their support of and patience with first-time editors, as well as for their willingness to share such an innovative and important space, I would like to extend a sincere thanks to Michele Shaul and Kathryn Quinn-Sánchez. In the end, any faults, errors, or omissions in this edition lie with my co-editor, Leopoldo Peña, and myself, not with the editors or the contributors themselves.

Works Cited

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