Cultural competency training and indigenous cultural politics in California

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Abstract This essay illuminates the challenges of using cultural competency training as an ethnicity-based political strategy for indigenous Mexicans struggling to gain rights and recognition in a transnational context. Through an analysis of the political and philosophical stakes in a cultural competence training delivered to social service providers by Mexican migrants, the essay interrogates the claim that these trainings, even when provided by linguistically and culturally competent facilitators, intervene in social and health inequities. The analysis is based on two and a half years of ethnographic research with a well-known indigenous Mexican migrant-led non-profit organization in California, Centro Binacional para el Desarrollo Indígena Oaxaqueño.


Keywords: cultural competency; cultural politics; migration; indigenous identity; health; social movements

Cultural Competency Training as Political Strategy

Since the 1980s there has been an increase in indigenous Mexican migrants from the southern Mexican states of Oaxaca, Guerrero and Chiapas to the United States (Fox and Rivera-Salgado, 2004; Stephen, 2007; Mines et al, 2010). The growing presence of this linguistically and culturally diverse population in California, Oregon, Washington, Alaska and, more recently, states further east (North Carolina, New York, Georgia, Florida and so on) has presented
challenges for social service providers, educators, medical workers and law enforcement officials who are accustomed to dealing with Spanish-speaking, mestizo migrants (Padgett and Mascarenas, 2009; Mines et al, 2010; Holmes, 2013). At the same time that their presence has complicated long-standing notions about Mexican migrants, the incorporation of indigenous Mexicans into the migrant stream has complicated notions about what it means to be Latino in the United States (Fox and Rivera-Salgado, 2004; Fox, 2006).

These “new” Mexican migrants speak languages such as Triqui, Mixteco, Zapoteco and Chatino, as well as Spanish, and sometimes English. They adhere to multiple cultural traditions, utilize a variety of healing approaches (Bade, 2004), are often more knowledgeable about US geography than most Americans (that is, they know how long it takes to drive to a variety of points across the southwest, where to stay, what roads to avoid, and where they can find work and when), and understand intimately the economics and politics of immigration and agricultural work in the United States and Mexico. Indigenous migrants, especially on the west coast, are well-organized and have binational social networks that they can draw from to advocate political change (Fox and Rivera-Salgado, 2004). In sum, they are a complex, diverse, multilingual and politically engaged transnational population.

For service providers, the social and cultural complexity of a population is usually addressed through the frame of “cultural competency,” which is commonly defined as “a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency or amongst professionals and enables that system, agency or those professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations” (Cross et al, 1989 cited in Spector, 2004). Over the last few years, cultural competence training has become de rigueur for those working in social services, clinical medicine, education and law enforcement. It has been argued that as US society becomes increasingly diverse, frontline workers need to be equipped with cultural information in order to adequately deal with the needs, values, beliefs, practices and lifestyles of those they encounter on a daily basis. This need has been signaled in a variety of reports (Smedley et al, 2003).

Despite these claims, there is mixed evidence about the effects, let alone the effectiveness of cultural competence training for frontline workers and the communities they serve (Beagan, 2003; Beach et al, 2005; Kumastan et al, 2007). While a number of studies have focused on teaching cultural competency in the health professions (Taylor, 2003a; Shaw, 2005; Kleinman and Benson, 2006; Shapiro et al, 2006; Carpenter-Song et al, 2007; Kumastan et al, 2007; Willen et al, 2010; Jenkins, 2011; Donal Hannah and Carpenter-Song, 2013), these studies have largely focused on the ways that health-care professionals teach clinical practitioners and medical students to be more culturally aware and sensitive in their practice. A few of these studies have looked at the challenges that minority practitioners have in teaching their colleagues to be culturally competent (Santiago-Irizarry, 2001) or in themselves being culturally competent with
racially concordant populations (Cooper et al., 2003). This article contributes an ethnographic analysis of representatives from a vulnerable population teaching social service providers, health-care professionals, police officers, judges, educators and others about how to be more culturally sensitive to them.

Below, I present and analyze a presentation meant to educate frontline workers about indigenous Mexicans living in the United States. Following Shaw (2005), this article specifically seeks to contribute to and build on the broad literature on teaching cultural competence by “analyzing culturally appropriate health care movements as political interventions” (294). It also adds to the literature on building civil society among indigenous migrants (Fox and Rivera-Salgado, 2004) by illuminating the ways that indigenous Mexicans seek to work with non-indigenous actors to improve their life circumstances in a diasporic context. Drawing from two and a half years of ethnographic research with a well-known indigenous Mexican migrant-led non-profit organization in California, Centro Binacional para el Desarrollo Indígena Oaxaqueño (CBDIO), my analysis documents the political and philosophical challenges of providing effective cultural competence training by using political theory to show what is at stake in these kinds of trainings. The research received approval from the Institutional Review Board at the University of California Santa Cruz, as well as approval from the Executive Director of CBDIO.

I argue that, despite their attempts to sensitize a variety of constituencies to the diversity and complexity of indigenous migrants in California, CBDIO’s cultural competency presentations risk contributing to the entrenched inequities they are attempting to undo. This is because their presentation paints a homogenized and essentialized picture of indigenous identity thereby potentially fulfilling rather than challenging stereotypes about Mexican Indians and it fails to call for a redistribution of social power and economic resources for indigenous migrants. CBDIO’s presentation therefore fails to achieve the comprehensive sense of participatory parity that its employees and service recipients aspire to in US society. While not necessarily new with regard to the adverse effects of cultural competence training (Taylor, 2003b; Gregg and Saha, 2006), my findings demonstrate the challenges of using cultural competency training as an ethnicity-based political strategy for gaining rights and recognition in a transnational context.

The failure to convey the complexity of indigenous identity, as a socially structured and historically informed process in relation to the US nation-state and its citizens, rather than an ontological outcome of an essentialized culture, leaves audience members wondering why they should care about a foreign and “illegal” population. Further, failure to lay out a road map of what kind of institutional and policy change would be necessary to bring about meaningful social transformation for indigenous peoples means that even those who would like to change are left with few tools for social change beyond a personal shift in attitude.

In what follows, I describe the evolution of CBDIO and the reasons it began offering cultural competence workshops. I then describe the presentation as

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1 Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this insight.
I have seen it offered in cities across California such as Salinas, Los Angeles, Fresno and Watsonville. In the final part of the article, I analyze the intended politics of the trainings and offer a critique of the ways that the presentations might reinforce rather than undo the kinds of unequal treatment that indigenous Mexicans experience in the United States. My analysis is not only drawn from my experience at the presentations but is also informed by conversations I had with CBDIO staff members, indigenous program participants and social service providers in California, as well as community health workers, medical staff, indigenous Mexicans and community organizations in Oaxaca, Mexico and Mexico City over the two and a half years I conducted research on this project.

**El Proyecto de Salud Indígena: A Brief History**

Employees at CBDIO are acutely aware of the fact that individuals working in clinical, educational and social service organizations, as well as law enforcement and civic leaders, need to have some understanding of the expanding and diverse indigenous Mexican migrant population in the United States in order to adequately serve them. In 20 years of operation, they have witnessed overt and covert racialized dynamics in which indigenous migrants were treated poorly by doctors, teachers, social workers and law enforcement officers. They have also observed the consequences of miscommunication, and misinterpretation of indigenous cultural norms, which have occasionally resulted in the incarceration and deportation of some of their indigenous friends and clients. Consequently, they have developed a cultural sensitivity training, which provides important information on the social, economic, political and cultural factors that inform the lives of indigenous Oaxacans in Mexico and in the United States.

CBDIO’s health promotion project began in 1997 as a collaborative effort with the farmworker women’s organization, Líderes Campesinas. The original project, Proyecto de Salud a La Mujer Indígena Migrante en el Valle de San Joaquín, was focused on providing indigenous migrant women with health information about issues such as breast cancer, diabetes, pesticides in the fields and domestic violence, among other themes. It was also concerned with developing female leadership within CBDIO’s sister organization, the Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales (FIOB), a binational social movement organization, so that indigenous women could play a meaningful role in the democratic decision-making processes of both institutions. In 1998, CBDIO took over full control of the project and continued to hold educational health workshops and events on women’s health in Merced, Madera, Tulare, Fresno and Kern Counties, as well as in Los Angeles, Santa Barbara and Santa Cruz, and to foster leadership roles for women in these areas.

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2 The Indigenous Woman Migrant’s Health Project of the San Joaquin Valley. My translation.
In 2001, CBDIO reduced the geographic area in which they provided services but expanded their target audience to include the whole family and not just indigenous women. By this time, many more women had become involved in the services of CBDIO and in the activities of FIOB. The goals of this new iteration of the program included: (i) identify where indigenous communities are residing in Fresno and Madera Counties and identify their needs so as to design appropriate programs for them; (ii) continue disease prevention workshops; (iii) conduct basic health exams to detect diabetes, high blood pressure, tuberculosis and HIV; (iv) organize health fairs for indigenous communities to learn about and access various health and social services; and (v) provide cultural sensitivity workshops to social service providers. During its three years in operation, this program also expanded to work with Zapotecs living in Los Angeles.

From 2004 to 2007, the indigenous health project was again funded to conduct work in Merced, Fresno, Tulare, Kern and Monterey. This iteration, which was the one I studied, continued to provide cultural sensitivity workshops to service providers, health fairs to the community, educational health workshops on disease prevention and one-on-one help to indigenous migrants in navigating the social service, education and health systems. Several components had changed, however. One was the inclusion of the community health worker or *promotores* model, which operates from a “train-the-trainer” approach. A second aspect was the explicit inclusion of interpretation services as part of the help provided to indigenous migrants navigating the health and social service systems. Although interpretation has always been a part of the services CBDIO has provided, it was explicitly included in the program objectives for this period of time. A final component, related to the cultural sensitivity trainings, was the development of a guidebook on Oaxacan culture for service providers and the organization of conferences on the use of indigenous or “traditional” medicine, also directed at educating service providers.

The objectives of CBDIO’s indigenous health project include the following: (i) provide health information to the indigenous community through workshops and health fairs; (ii) help indigenous migrants navigate the social service system, often filling out documents and providing interpretation services for them; (iii) utilize the *promotora* model to train indigenous *promotoras*; and (iv) educate service providers about the presence and culture of indigenous Mexicans in California and their use of indigenous medicine through informative workshops, presentations and a cultural guidebook. The overall goals of this project are to help indigenous migrants access much-needed services while, at the same time, heightening awareness among service providers of indigenous presence and particularities so their interactions with this population can become more culturally competent. In the next section, I describe the cultural sensitivity trainings provided by CBDIO. This description is then followed by an analysis of the political and epistemological frameworks being forwarded within the workshop. Together, these two sections provide the backdrop for
my analysis about why the trainings might be counter-productive to their goal of sensitizing program participants to the lives and struggles of indigenous migrants.

**Understanding the Oaxacan Indigenous Culture: CBDIO’s Cultural Sensitivity Training**

The cultural sensitivity training entitled “Understanding the Oaxacan Indigenous Culture” touches on the following themes: a definition of cultural competency, the demographic profile of indigenous communities in Oaxaca, indigenous history, traditional medicine, family values, migration patterns, living conditions in California and community organizing efforts. It is meant to provide a broad overview of indigenous Oaxacans, including where they come from, who they are, how they act and why, and how they live and solve their problems in the United States.

The term “cultural sensitivity,” as CBDIO employees use it, connotes a level beyond “competency” or “awareness,” and asks providers to consider and respond appropriately to the cultural differences of indigenous Mexicans. Critical reflection on the differences between non-indigenous provider and indigenous client is what distinguishes “competency” from “sensitivity” for CBDIO staff. CBDIO’s cultural sensitivity trainings are meant to complement the direct services and information they provide to indigenous Mexican migrants in California. Their hope is that by educating service providers and service recipients, the interaction that results will be more respectful and effective. In addition, they hope that their bidirectional strategy will reinforce the cultural formations of indigenous Mexicans by stemming the disrespect and ignorance that some service providers demonstrate in the face of indigenous cultural difference.

Some of the important points they make in their cultural sensitivity trainings, besides providing background information on Oaxaca and an overview of indigenous Oaxacan health status in Mexico, have to do with the vital importance of appropriate language interpretation, that is, not Spanish-speaking interpreters but interpreters that speak the same language and dialect of the client being helped. To say that one speaks Mixtec, for example, is not enough information for adequate interpretation. One must also know the region and village from which the client originates in order to know whether the interpreter speaks the same dialect of the Mixtec language. CBDIO also stresses the need to make materials visually and verbally accessible to a population whose reading level often does not exceed the fourth grade, to have service hours that correspond with community needs, and to use community leaders or gatekeepers to build trust and rapport with their clients. An important component of the
workshops is to provide information about cultural norms of indigenous communities that could have legal repercussions in the United States, such as the use of physical punishment to discipline children, the importance of teaching children how to work alongside their parents in their jobs, the early age at which daughters are married or the use of older siblings to care for younger siblings while the parents are away.

These trainings were usually provided by two presenters, Leoncio Vasquez, a Mixteco from San Miguel Cuevas, a rural town in the State of Oaxaca, and Nayamin Martínez Cossio, a mestiza woman from the State of Mexico. They had both lived in the United States for over eight years at the time of the study. The overall goal of their presentation, as stated at the conclusion, is to “strengthen collaboration between Centro and health and social service providers in an effort to improve the wellbeing of indigenous communities and educate them on the functioning of the US health and social systems.” The conclusion also offers some tips for health and social service providers, suggesting that they should “train all staff to be more sensitive in providing service to indigenous people, especially if they do not speak English or Spanish; provide interpreters in indigenous languages whenever needed; and take into account the cultural background of the indigenous migrants whenever needed; and take into account the cultural background of the indigenous migrants when judging their behavior.”

Of interest in their presentation is the way that culture is being presented and the politics to which the portrayal of indigenous culture lends itself. The definition of culture utilized in the presentation is taken from Spector (2004), and is defined as the “sum of beliefs, practices, habits, likes, dislikes, norms, customs, rituals, and so forth that we learn from our families and years of socialization.” Drawing from this definition, the presenters open with a discussion of indigenous customs or rituals. Leoncio provides the information on indigenous culture. He discusses the political organization of the community called Usos y Costumbres (also known as customary or normative law) in which the practice of tequio is central. This form of civic governance dates from the pre-Hispanic era and continues today, according to Leoncio, “as a way for our community to keep running itself.” The custom of tequio is that males over 18 assume cargos or duties in the community for a fixed period of time (from one to three years). The point of the tequio is “to make community projects happen.” It is defined in the presentation as “collective work for the benefit of the whole village.” Part of the explanation of this indigenous custom includes a discussion of the need for men who are living in the United States to return to their community of origin to fulfill their tequio or risk being ostracized from their home town because tequio is obligatory and not voluntary. Leoncio also discusses the added burden their absence puts on their families in the United States as husbands, sons and fathers leave their families who, in many cases, they have paid to bring over the border, in order to return to Mexico and pay their service to the community with their labor.

One of the rituals discussed in the workshop is the Day of the Dead, or el Día de los Muertos. This holiday is described as a day to “remember and
show appreciation for loved ones who have passed away.” In particular, the presentation cites the Zapotecs as maintaining this tradition by decorating altars with food, alcohol and marigolds to welcome their dead back. Leoncio explains, “On November 2nd, we think that the spirits of our loved ones come back and taste the food.” Part of this tradition also involves leaving the door to the house open so the spirits can easily re-enter the home. Many indigenous migrants feel the necessity to return to their communities of origin in order to open the door for their loved ones and lament the fact that, with increased border security, this is becoming an impossibility. Another ritual discussed is that of the Guelaguetza, a cultural and social celebration, which, according to the presenters, has been practiced since the pre-Columbian era. The word Guelaguetza comes from Zapotec and means gift or offering. The purpose of the celebration is to show gratitude to the Creator for the good harvest of the year and, at the same time, have a social gathering to give or share food, music and dance.4

The primary custom emphasized in the presentation is the use of traditional or indigenous medicine. Both presenters take turns explaining that, among indigenous Oaxacans, it is believed that external agents (supernatural, human, non-human) cause illness. They describe how sickness can result from strong emotions (fear, anger, jealousy) and evil spirits. Babies are especially vulnerable to strong emotions and mothers often do not let strangers hold or come near their newborns. Examples of ethnospecific illnesses, such as coraje (anger), nervios (anxiety or stress), susto (fright or soul loss), empacho (indigestion) and mal de ojo (the evil eye), are provided but not defined. They also explain that indigenous healers have specialties, just like allopathic doctors and, in addition to their role as healers, they are seen as community leaders and protectors who possess divinatory and prophetic skills. Their healing rituals include the use of medicinal plants, prayers, ceremonies and card reading. The purpose of the healing ritual is to restore the equilibrium of the sick person who may be too hot or too cold, or in the case of susto, have lost his or her spirit. The presenters explain that people may go to an allopathic doctor and also seek help from an indigenous healer. The fact that clinical services are less accessible, however, and that rural medical units in Oaxaca are often short on medications, make traditional healing or “folk” medicine the first line of defense. Drawing on the work of medical anthropologist Bade (2004), who has called this practice “transmedicalization,” Nayamin explains that indigenous migrants do not abandon their cultural beliefs in the United States, but mix them with the health services available here, often seeking help first from a traditional healer and then from an allopathic doctor or clinical practitioner.

After discussing several of the rituals and customs practiced by indigenous Oaxacans, the presentation introduces family and social values. The importance of the nuclear and extended family is emphasized, especially in terms

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4 Oaxacan Culture: Cultural Competence Guidebook, 2007, written by CBDIO with funding by the California Endowment.
of providing mutual support, caring for children and helping other family members to meet their needs. The importance of elders as prominent community members, and the value of women’s roles as those who primarily take care of the family are discussed. The presenters explain that, in the United States, because parents work so much, they have a difficult time preserving this cohesion.

The discussion of values also provides an explanation of the indigenous perspective regarding childrearing and the importance of teaching children responsibility. This information is interlaced with a discussion about cultural and, ultimately, legal clashes, in which well-meaning parents take their children to work in the fields or leave under-age children to care for their younger siblings and are subsequently punished for breaking child labor laws or for neglect and child abuse. The primary example they give that demonstrates how cultural differences can lead to legal repercussions is that of discipline. They explain that discipline in indigenous families can include not only yelling, but also physical punishment, which is considered child abuse under US law but which is not perceived as such by indigenous parents. They also describe how parents feel a sense of helplessness in the United States, because their children often threaten to call 911 if they attempt to discipline them in any form. The lack of disciplinary authority leads children to do what they want, which often results in them spending a lot of time in the street and possibly joining a gang. The indigenous custom of girls getting married at a very young age is also highlighted as one that can create both cultural and legal difficulties for indigenous migrants and can result in moral clashes between legal authorities and indigenous parents.

The final point they make on culture has to do with communication styles. They explain that “indigenous people do not express their ideas straight to the point. They need to contextualize their problems and experiences.” Further, they need to feel confidence and a sense of trust in the person with whom they are communicating. They explain that when communication is not effective, it can result in further family complications. For example, when indigenous children refuse to learn their parents’ language of origin and grow up speaking English or Spanish instead, this can lead to intra-family divisions. In extreme cases, poor translation or no translation has resulted in the institutionalization of indigenous migrants. In one case cited in the presentation, a Triqui man spent several years in a mental health clinic on medication until someone realized that, although Mexican, he did not speak Spanish. In another example that CBDIO was involved with, a couple spent a night in a Fresno jail because the hospital staff was convinced they were trying to kill their child when they did not follow medical recommendations but, because of a lack of understanding, did exactly the opposite. Given the centrality of communication, the presentation concludes by stressing the importance of finding an interpreter who speaks the same language and dialect of the person receiving services.
The Politics of Recognizing “Indigenous Culture”

Leave aside for the moment the fact that the cultural sensitivity trainings essentialize Oaxacan indigenous identity and render indigenous culture, which is used in the singular, a homogeneous and fixed set of beliefs, practices, rituals, customs and so on. It is important to analyze what is discursively being brought to bear in these presentations, what kind of politics they forward through the use of certain themes and topics. While explicitly discussing culture, these trainings are also discursively bringing to bear conceptions of indigenous rationality, their relationship with nature, life and death, with self and community. In sum, through their discussion of culture, they are describing how power is conceptualized in indigenous communities. At the same time that the training presents this sketch of indigenous culture as if it were a fixed reflection of indigenous “truth,” the presenters are also willing it into existence by their desire to have service providers understand their indigenous clients in this way. That is, not only are they discussing the culture and, therefore, the politics of indigenous Oaxacans, they are also simultaneously creating this culture/politics as real. In so doing, they themselves are offering a political vision of the world into which they hope to entice the service providers or, at the very least, invite them to understand that there are “other” ways of living.

What “truth” or reality are they presenting? What are its implications? Embedded in the discussions of tequio and of the primacy of family, we see a community politics that puts the group before the self or individual. The “logic” or rationality informing this was explained to me several times by both Leoncio and Nayamin, as well as by the indigenous leaders I met while living in Greenfield, California. The idea as they conveyed it to me, and paraphrased here, is if the community well-being is secured, then one’s individual well-being will also be secured. This perspective reinforces the idea and practice of collective solidarity and inter-dependence through what Mignolo (2007) refers to as “a qualitative economy of communal reciprocity.” Referred to by Aquino Moreschi (2013) following Santos (2009) as an “epistemology of the south,” this sense of self or “communality,” which gives primacy to the collective over the individual, contrasts with the Western, liberal notion of self and subjectivity, which privileges the individual over the collective. The idea that families are willing to pay a high price by being separated from their fathers, sons, brothers and husbands, who must return to their hometowns for the good of the community and in order to stay physically connected to the social body by their presence and labor, demonstrates the strength of this community spirit. The presentation reveals the ethics and politics in Oaxaca in a comparative frame. As Nayamin explained, “[Indigenous Oaxacans] have a moral obligation to participate. The primary identity in indigenous communities is communal and collective. The US is very individualistic in comparison.”
With the increase in border security, indigenous migrants now pay someone else to fulfill their *tequio* for them, or have a family member, even a female, complete their *cargo*, because the emotional, physical and economic cost of the travel home is too high (Ventura Luna, 2010). This commitment reflects the importance of supporting the community even when one is far away. Despite this changing trend, there are some men who return to their communities of origin. Indeed, I met a Mixtec man while he was serving his *tequio* on the Comité de Salud in San Miguel de Las Cuevas, Oaxaca. His job was to open and close the clinic every day. He fulfilled this *cargo* while his family was living in Fresno, California. As Ventura Luna, a Mixtec woman completing her doctoral thesis at UC Riverside on Tequio in Oaxaca, explains about the process, “You take it on yourself with humility … You say ‘Yes I’ll do it, I’ll do my best’” (Garrigues, 2013).

The discussion of indigenous medicine and the *Guelaguetza* show the importance of living with and as part of the earth, rather than dominating it. Indeed, the celebration of the fruits of the earth, especially corn, demonstrates how important nature is in the ongoing survival of indigenous Oaxacans. The use of plants as medicine to heal illness and disease is also testament to the fact that indigenous peoples live in a symbiotic relationship with nature in which each has a role to play in the survival of the other. Thus, the politics being forwarded in this cultural discussion is that of a role for humans in which they do not control or dominate nature, including their own, a perspective that is antithetical to that of the modern, liberal subject. In order to secure their health, well-being and ongoing existence, they must look outside of themselves to the world (social and material) around them for the support necessary to keep on living. Indeed, this ties into the prior theme, in which the well-being of the collective body comes before that of the individual body.

This belief is also reflected in indigenous etiologies, which see external rather than internal agents as the cause of illness (CBDIO, 2007). For this reason, indigenous healers must utilize their divinatory powers to assess the possible social or historical factors that have caused the person to become sick, utilizing eggs and other natural elements as diagnostic tools. Their questions to the patient, which are generally very few, are focused on the social history of the person before falling ill. This is in contrast, we are told, to clinical doctors whose questions are many as reflected on the health history forms one fills out before the visit and that are often focused on the biological history of the patient. Consequently, the indigenous diagnostic process often entails a long discussion in which the patient recounts everything that happened to her before falling ill. By contrast with allopathic medicine and its focus on patient confidentiality, the family can be present for both the diagnosis and the healing ritual.

Malevolent spirits are not the only actors in indigenous social life. Relatives who have passed away continue to have a presence in the lives of their family members as is evident on the Day of the Dead. The ongoing presence of spirits, malevolent and benevolent, challenges the idea that only living human beings are
actors in the world. In this view, indigenous understandings of community and family are capacious enough not only to extend across national borders, but across lifeworlds. This provides a particular political vision of both citizenship and belonging from an indigenous perspective, a belonging that is not exclusively identified with geography.

In sum, the perspective of indigenous culture forwarded in the cultural sensitivity training presents while at the same time proposing a particular political and ethical relationship between self and other, in the effort to foster life and well-being for indigenous people. This relationship puts the social body before the individual body, it assumes a relationship of equality and symbiosis with nature and it incorporates a variety of actors – living and dead, human and non-human – in its conceptions of life and health. Such collective solidarity reflects an indigenous social contract that ensures, to the extent possible – and notwithstanding globalization, government repression and intra-community violence – both the physical and economic security of community members through mutual aid and support. The goal of the presentation is both to show how this politics of mutuality and solidarity works and to reinforce the importance and value of “alternative” or “other” visions of life that inhere in indigenous culture so that, in their interactions with Oaxacan migrants, service providers can be more sensitive and, as Leoncio once said in a pertinent mis-translation from Spanish, “sensible.”

Nayamin summed up the goal of the training when she said to the service providers, “If you think, ‘I am right, I have the truth,’ the only thing you’ll accomplish is putting a barricade between you and the client. If you come from a positive perspective, they will be open. You would feel the same.”

**Power and Tolerance**

The cultural sensitivity presentation seems to go a long way in terms of providing those in the helping professions with the necessary tools to improve services for their Oaxacan clients. The fact that it is delivered by a Mixteco migrant from Oaxaca and a Mexican migrant woman, sometimes with the presence and participation of other indigenous staff members of CBDIO, drives home the embodied realities discussed regarding the health conditions associated with poverty in Oaxaca, the risks involved in increasingly dangerous border crossings, and the growing presence of a socially and economically vulnerable migrant group in the United States. Despite being a powerful testament to the strength, beauty and value of Oaxacan cultures and the politics contained within them, however, I suggest that, rather than furthering CBDIO’s goal of cultural maintenance, the presentation contributes to its undoing. This is because the cultural sensitivity presentation not only essentializes indigenous Oaxacan culture, thereby reinforcing a Self/Other distinction.
in which the service providers remain the point of reference against which the indigenous “Others” are necessarily defined. It also does not challenge the political economic relationships which keep indigenous Mexicans in an economically marginalized status. In what follows, I offer a deeper analysis of what is at stake in CBDIO’s presentation.

Brown’s discussion of tolerance is a useful start. Brown (2006) argues that when tolerance is mobilized as a political discourse concerned with designated modalities of diversity, identity, justice and civic cohabitation (all of the things that CBDIO’s cultural sensitivity training is concerned with), it marks those subjects to be tolerated as inferior, deviant or marginal vis-a-vis those practicing tolerance. Brown (2006) explains, “Almost all objects of tolerance are marked as deviant by virtue of being tolerated, and the action of tolerance inevitably affords some access to superiority” (14). The discursive appeal to tolerance not only produces those subjects to be tolerated as inferior, it also depoliticizes this production by naturalizing cultural difference and then arguing that social inequality, subordination, marginalization and conflict is based on ahistorical and essentialized cultural differences. In other words, the “culturalization” of difference operates in the same way as the racialization of difference. Brown (2006) explains, “tolerance discourse reduces conflict to an inherent friction among identities and makes religious, ethnic and cultural difference itself an inherent site of conflict, one that calls for and is attenuated by the practice of tolerance” (15). Applying this to the cultural sensitivity training, we see that CBDIO’s presentation depoliticizes the historical and political sources of what is presented as an essentialized indigenous cultural difference, thereby politicizing the “difference” itself rather than its modes of production. This depoliticization leads, in turn, to calls for tolerance, thereby cementing what appears to be static and bounded cultural differences between indigenous and non-indigenous groups. One example of this kind of ahistorical essentialization that often comes up in the cultural sensitivity trainings is the fact that many indigenous migrants fail to make eye contact with non-indigenous people. This is often referred to by CBDIO staff as an indigenous “norm.” A historical read of this “norm” reveals that it is an effect of colonization and should not be essentialized as an ontological feature of indigenous peoples, but rather understood as a learned survival strategy in conditions of extreme oppression. In presenting indigenous culture as static and singular, CBDIO puts indigenous Mexicans in the position of the cultural “other” to be tolerated and the cultural sensitivity training participants as the benevolent group who tolerate.

This dynamic has further implications. Insofar as the appeal to tolerance is meant to change the behavior and feelings of the service providers, it reduces the weight of historically induced suffering to a problem of personal feeling thereby replacing the field of political battle and political transformation with an agenda of behavioral, attitudinal and emotional practices. This displacement is political as Brown (2006) argues, “while such practices often have their value, substituting
a tolerant attitude or ethos for political redress of inequality or violent exclusions not only reifies politically produced differences but reduces political action and justice to sensitivity training, or what Richard Rorty has called an ‘improvement in manners’” (16). At the same time, the diversity that exists within and between indigenous groups is glossed over and a culturalized (read racialized) indigenous identity is produced thereby reinscribing a binary between those who are perceived to be ruled by “their” culture and those who rule themselves but enjoy the culture of “others.” In other words, it reinscribes a binary in which those who rule their nature are perceived as being without or beyond culture, while those who do not dominate their nature are perceived as being dominated by their culture. To the extent that the service providers are the referent in the trainings, they are not challenged to re-think their own subjectivities, cultural particularities, or historically informed and structurally reinforced self-conceptions, but rather are encouraged to reflect upon (thereby reinforcing) the cultural “difference” of indigenous Oaxacans by coming to know how “they” think and act. In other words, the subjectivities of service workers as “helpers,” “providers” and as the holders of the “truth” are solidified and legitimated by the presentation, rather than undone. This process of “cognitive injustice” (Aquino Moreschi, 2013) is based on the idea that there exists a superior knowledge that, in affirming itself, denies or devalues other, different kinds of knowledge.

CBDIO’s explanations of indigenous customs, values and society address US-based service providers both as interlocutors and as the population that they must convince about the legitimacy and value of indigenous ways of knowing and being. Nayamin’s closing comment that called for the service providers to put themselves in the situation of indigenous migrants (you would feel the same) can be seen as a call for social service and clinical workers to accept this legitimacy. Indeed, it is for this reason that culture is presented in the workshops as static and “authentic” for, as Leoncio reminded me, if it were to be more politicized, the audience would not be as receptive to it. Leoncio made this comment on the heels of a presentation we did together in Watsonville, California in October 2007. He presented on indigenous culture and I followed with a presentation on the history of colonization, American imperialism and the current neocolonial climate in which indigenous Oaxacans live. After my presentation, Leoncio turned to me and said, “You said all of the things I couldn’t dare to say in my presentation.” Leoncio’s comment reveals the unequal relationship that exists between indigenous migrants and US-based service providers (many of whom are of Mexican origin), but which remains unspoken and unaddressed in the cultural sensitivity presentation because it would challenge the hegemony of the audience members. This challenge is perceived by CBDIO staff as something to be avoided insofar as they need the continued social and financial support of those people that attend their trainings in order to do their work. Fostering hostility toward CBDIO or the indigenous migrants they help would not be a desirable outcome of the training. Indeed,
one of the purposes of the trainings is to make the audience members more empathetic when dealing with indigenous clients.

Reinforcing Inequalities

Despite CBDIO’s relative silence about the historical factors that inform the current cultural formations of indigenous migrants, however, the social and racial inequalities between those who provide services and those who receive them are often revealed during the question and answer period of the training. As Nayamin and Leoncio explained to me, and as I also witnessed, service providers, almost always of Mexican origin, often wondered aloud why they should change their behavior and institutional practices to accommodate indigenous migrants who have “made the choice” to come to the United States. I suggest that, if CBDIO’s presentation did discuss the historical, economic and political forces informing indigenous migration and subordination, audience members would be aware of the fact that in many cases the “choice” that is so often and easily referred to in immigration debates is one between life and death for the migrant and his or her family and is, therefore, not a choice at all. Further, should the historical, economic and political forces informing the everyday lives of indigenous migrants be emphasized, hostile service providers might better understand their role in the perpetuation of the racialized and class-based dynamic, which informs the injustices perceived by indigenous migrants. Openly addressing the structural injustices that indigenous migrants confront, even if that is not the term they use to describe it in their workshop, and showing how it is perpetuated in everyday ideas as anthropologist Holmes (2013) does in his award-winning study of Triqui migrants, could open avenues for off-setting the social determinants that negatively impact indigenous health. One way to do this would be to spend a few minutes talking about the harms that the term “illegal” causes and drawing on recent commitments by media outlets to stop using the term (Haughney, 2013). Another way would be to do as Holmes suggests and interrogate the symbolic violence that is perpetrated in the everyday lives of Triqui farmworkers when they are conceptualized as a population that “likes” to work bent over.6

In addition, the cultural sensitivity presentation does not engage values in the US health, family, legal, social or philanthropic systems. These systems are discussed as if they are simply “different,” implying that they are equal and reflecting an apolitical multiculturalism that, as Mignolo (2007, 32) explains, “concede[s] ‘culture’ while maintaining epistemology.” In other words, cultural “difference” is in fact repressed under the guise of attending to it. This has the effect of naturalizing the US systems and their rationalities as the norm, thereby creating Oaxacan values, norms and culture as deviant. This is an effect of the naturalist perspective in which those who are understood as dominating their

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6 Other health scholars offer helpful frameworks for addressing structural vulnerability (Quesada et al, 2011) and structural competence (Metzl and Hansen, 2014).
nature are before culture, while those who have not, are dominated by their culture. This is a racialized division that gets worked out on the terrain of culture. One area where norms are particularly relevant but largely unaddressed because there is too much at stake is in the influence that philanthropic foundations have on the program areas and content of CBDIO’s programs. As CBDIO is largely reliant on foundation support, it cannot offer programs or support values that would contradict or challenge those of their funders. For example, the issue of teen pregnancy among indigenous migrants was of particular concern for a funder in the Central Valley during the period I was conducting my research, but CBDIO employees were conflicted about submitting a proposal because from their perspective teen pregnancy could be a very positive thing for an indigenous family. They did not want to tell the funder this and risk alienating them, but they also did not want to lose the opportunity for additional funding. In the end, they did not apply for support.

Through the anecdotes provided in the presentation, we see that the “differences” in US social values are not harmless insofar as they put economic opportunities at risk for CBDIO, they create legal problems for families, and reinforce divisions between parents and their children. These generational divisions are exacerbated by the threat of deportation, which looms over many parents’ heads. Indigenous parents are often forced to decide between risking deportation if their children do call 911 or not disciplining them and suffering the consequences if they join a gang, start taking drugs or get picked up by the police for ditching school or shop lifting. Such risks are also increased by the linguistic divisions in households, as social pressure and educational institutions are teaching students to be English speakers while their parents have limited speaking and literacy skills in Spanish, let alone English. And, when children deviate from US social and legal norms, their parents are held morally and legally responsible by the individualizing frame dominant in the United States. It is this same frame that conspires to reinforce a view that all undocumented Mexican migrants suffer from a social pathology, that they are bad parents, irresponsible and immoral individuals. As Inda’s (2006) work Targeting Immigrants attests, the assumed “pathology” of undocumented migrants is informed by hegemonic ideas about health, self and society.

One of the points the presenters make is that it is very hard for indigenous people to adapt to their new environment, because of social isolation and cultural attachment. As the presenters point out, “they stay isolated by choice due to the long history of discrimination and colonization. The isolation goes both ways. They are marginalized and self-marginalizing.” On the surface, this statement appears to provide a critique of the colonial legacy and its effects on indigenous Oaxacans while also providing a reason why they might not readily assimilate. What it does not provide, however, is a critique of the idea that they should assimilate and assumes that they do not or cannot. This view does not attend to the linguistic and cultural diversity exhibited across generations and ethnic
groups of indigenous migrants. Further, it assumes that isolation or assimilation are the only two possibilities informing their lives in the United States. The everyday realities, in which they interact with a diverse range of actors from different race and class backgrounds, including powerful community and civic leaders, challenge the notion that they either fully resist or fully surrender to an American lifestyle. While many of them do live in situations of extreme vulnerability, they are not powerless and often find ways to strategically engage with the dominant system while maintaining and promoting their core beliefs. The cultural sensitivity workshops can be understood as one way of doing this. These strategic cultural negotiations signal a political use of indigenous identity and challenge atavistic conceptualizations of indigenous migrants.

More importantly for the purposes of this essay, it takes colonization as a remnant of the past rather than positing it as an ongoing relationship between indigenous Mexicans on both sides of the border and the United States. The North American Free Trade Agreement is an excellent example of this neocolonial exploitation. Indeed, without this political economic relationship, indigenous groups would not be leaving their communities in droves, nor would they be entering social, economic and political conditions in the United States that temporarily value their bodies for their labor without more than superficially valuing their indigenous “selves.” Rather, they would be exercising their “right to stay home,” a right that indigenous social movements on both sides of the US–Mexico border have been promoting.

In juxtaposition to the cultural competency model, one intervention that did seem to work well was to have a lawyer explain to service providers and law enforcement officials the potential legal consequences of their inability to respond to the cultural, social and political norms of indigenous migrants. In her presentation, “Indigenous ‘Migrants’ the Criminal Justice System: Relevant Domestic and International Frameworks,” sociologist and legal scholar, Pamela Izvănariu, argued for the constitutional importance of linguistically and culturally competent treatment for indigenous migrants and showed how cultural and linguistic miscommunications “result in unlawful arrest; excessive use of force; unlawful detainment and imprisonment; and unjust and unfair legal proceedings.” This presentation was part of an afternoon workshop on indigenous migrants sponsored jointly by CBDIO and its sister organization the FIOB.

The workshop was scheduled in part as a response to the September 2010 shooting of an indigenous Guatemalan man who was shot in the head by the LAPD when he did not respond to their attempts in Spanish and English to get him to put down a knife he was brandishing. The death of Manuel Jamines Xum, a Quiche man, and the protests that ensued from his death, apparently caused many in the community and at the LAPD to look for solutions for dealing with the large indigenous migrant community in Los Angeles. Members of CBDIO and the FIOB seized the opportunity to train a concerned audience. Although history, social and cultural norms, as well as immigration policies were discussed during

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7 Pamela Izvănariu, “Indigenous ‘Migrants’ the criminal justice system: Relevant domestic and international frameworks,” power point presentation.
the half-day event, many in the room stated that the constitutional violations outlined by Izvănariu were the most compelling reason for reconsidering the way they conducted their business.

**The Challenge of Cultural Competency**

Can the subaltern be heard? This riff on Spivak’s (1988) famous question leads us to question the extent to which indigenous Oaxacans can be audible or intelligible within the current context of zero tolerance and grant-driven service provision. CBDIO’s bidirectional strategy in which indigenous migrants learn the healthcare system while service providers learn indigenous culture sets up a power dynamic in which the service providers can continue to view Oaxacans as “quaint,” backward, “traditional” and, ultimately, inferior, while at the same time reinforcing their confidence that because they have science, law, education and, ultimately “civilization” on their side, they are superior. Foucault’s (1972, 197) notion of *episteme* is useful here. “The *episteme* is the ‘apparatus’ which makes possible the separation not of the true from the false, but of what may from what may not be characterized as scientific.” Those that are perceived as lacking “scientificity” are also seen to lack civilization – and thus education, the rule of law, development, progress and so on. It is because of this perceived lack and the apparent need to civilize indigenous Oaxacans that many funders and service providers continue to support the work of CBDIO.

The bidirectional strategy of training both indigenous migrants and service providers not only does not challenge service providers to re-think and re-shape their own epistemological and ontological formations, their ways of being and knowing, it also gives them an added power because now they “know” the indigenous Other and can use this knowledge to “help” the “poor” Oaxacans whose “superstitious” beliefs in *mal de ojo* or *nervios* can be relativized and re-pathologized in terms of depression, anxiety or some other seemingly equivalent psychopathology. The lack of engagement with the cultural “differences” that make the difference, especially those regarding individual versus collective subjectivity, were made apparent to me in a discussion with a university professor who teaches courses about different medical systems and who herself is a therapist working with Mexican migrants, some of whom are indigenous. She explained that once we understand what they (indigenous Mexicans) think they are suffering from such as *nervios* or *mal de ojo*, we can use the standard referent for all psychotherapists, the Diagnostic Service Manual, to determine what they really have and therefore develop a treatment plan. In other words, we can compare it with our epistemologies and come up with the “truth” of their pathology. The problem with this notion is that the discipline of psychology, like many of the “human sciences,” focuses on the individual as the site of pathology,
which, as CBDIO’s presentation discusses, is contrary to the perspective of indigenous Oaxacans. Further, this individualized and individualizing lens neglects the larger historical, social and cultural factors that inform health conditions such as nervios among migrant populations. It also does not attend to the distinct meanings and interpretations of nervios for those who suffer from this condition.

The knowledge of the “other” can also legitimate health and legal professionals’ comprehension of the social pathologies inflicting immoral and undocumented (read “illegal” and hence criminal) indigenous parents. Thus, their newly acquired knowledge of indigenous culture, which traffics under the term “cultural sensitivity” can be used by the service providers to justify the physical and social pathologies that discursively inhere in the supposed developmental (that is, backward, pre-modern, unscientific and so on) “difference” of indigenous Oaxacans. The imbalance of power is further exacerbated by the fact that service providers can and do easily change jobs, taking the cultural knowledge they have gained with them as they would knowledge they acquire from a museum or a vacation to an “exotic” land. This knowledge will translate into economic advantage, as they can claim education and, in some cases, certification in indigenous cultural competency.

Indigenous migrants do not have this luxury, as they can neither abandon their lives nor, in most cases, do they receive extra compensation for the knowledge they possess. What they can hope for is continued physical existence, which is increasingly attached to their economic, rather than cultural survival. In this context, indigenous culture is seen in utilitarian terms as something the future generations should retain if it will help them find work as translators, service providers and so on, but not for the politics and vision of the world it contains.

In other words, the human capital of indigenous migrants is too often valued only insofar as it can be translated into financial capital. Most of the time, however, the politics that undergird indigenous healing and mutual support are perceived as out of date and even burdensome. This is especially the case with indigenous youth, who often resist learning their parents’ languages and history, and with those in the social service, clinical and legal professions, who often resent having to schedule an interpreter and resist trying to understand the logics and norms of their indigenous clientele.

Although these cultural competency workshops are seen by CBDIO as an important political and economic mechanism for furthering the indigenous struggle for rights and recognition, their strategies for educating community workers conspire to undermine their struggle to maintain indigenous culture and may even reinforce the inequities they are attempting to address with their workshops. This may be an insurmountable tension if they do not integrate both cultural and structural competence (Metzl and Hansen, 2014). A more effective strategy might be to show how indigenous lives and those of the social service providers are and have been entangled politically, economically and socially,
thereby minimizing the focus on cultural difference, and elaborating on how those historic entanglements have produced unequal relations of power (where one is knowner, the other known or one is legal the other illegal and so on). Ultimately, all of the actors involved in cultural competency work, including those of us who are actively engaged in social justice and anti-racism scholarship and whose work bridges the academy and the community, are challenged to find political, methodological and epistemological frameworks that will destabilize the naturalized Self/Other distinction shaped by the colonial past and neocolonial present that informs the lives, and deaths, of indigenous migrants in the United States.

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