

***AUTHOR'S PRE-PRINT**

This is a preprint of an article whose final and definitive form has been published in the *British Journal of Sociology and Education* © 2019 Taylor & Francis; *The British Journal of Sociology and Education* is available online at:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01425692.2019.1565990>

Cite as:

Gellman, Mneesha (2019). "The right to learn our (m)other tongues: indigenous languages and neoliberal citizenship in El Salvador and Mexico." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 40(4): 523-537.

**The Right to Learn Our (M)other Tongues:
Indigenous Languages and Neoliberal Citizenship in El Salvador and Mexico**

Mneesha Gellman, Associate Professor of Political Science, Emerson College

Abstract

This article critically examines bilingual, intercultural education policies and practices in El Salvador and Mexico. In the context of legacies of assimilation and neoliberal homogenization, certain kinds of citizenship become prioritized over others. This is visible where performances of local identity clash with state mandates about educational content and the language of school instruction. I address the effects of state agendas in schools on the politics of multiculturalism and argue that the absence of state commitment to bilingual, intercultural education undermines democratization efforts by marginalizing certain types of citizens more than others. By considering ethnic minority education in both El Salvador and Mexico, I analyze in comparative perspective the ways that indigenous people have been rendered invisible as citizens unless they are willing to assimilate in the arena of formal education.

Keywords: education, language, indigenous, assimilation, El Salvador, Mexico

Introduction

The primary school 'Mario Calvo Marroquín' is across the street from the municipal government offices and the central plaza in Izalco, in the Sonsonate district of El Salvador.

Murals on exterior walls brighten the concrete building and bilingual Spanish-Nahuatl posters line the halls. The school is a unique site in El Salvador where children can take classes in the Nahuatl language during the course of a public school education. Nahuatl is one of several

AUTHOR'S PRE-PRINT

indigenous languages still spoken in El Salvador, and for Nahua indigenous youth, the Nahuat language is a heritage language, meaning the language of one's forbearers, rather than a mother tongue, which indicates a primary language learned from birth. Heritage languages around the world are being learned by descendants of mother tongue speakers, sometimes several generations removed, as additional elective languages that hold a special meaning for personal identity.

On a visit to the school in 2012, eight- and nine-year old children, accompanied by their guitar-playing instructor, regaled me with renditions of the national anthem and other Salvadoran songs in Nahuat and then launched into a vocabulary lesson. Spanish remains the predominant language of school instruction, but the intention is to switch more and more to Nahuat as students progress in the bilingual curriculum. One poster in the school administrative office proclaimed in Spanish, 'The absence of culture is civic death!' In a country where past governments have proclaimed that there are no indigenous citizens, the 'Mario Calvo Marroquín' school is teaching a small portion of the next generation of Salvadorans otherwise.

Indigenous language resilience is also playing out in Mexico. With a comparable history of colonialism and forced assimilation to El Salvador, Mexico differs in the size and robustness of its indigenous population. Despite Mexican congressional approval of the General Law of Linguistic Rights of the Indigenous Peoples in 2003, which gives indigenous languages national language status, the practice of Castilianization—the transforming of indigenous language speakers into Spanish speakers—continues to happen in the heavily indigenous southernmost state of Chiapas. Schools have been and continue to be sites of shame for indigenous Mexican schoolchildren, where they are often persecuted for speaking their mother tongues. In urban San Cristóbal de las Casas, a teacher of Tzotzil and Spanish told me 'There is a contradiction

AUTHOR'S PRE-PRINT

between what is written in the law, and the practice. There is no prohibition to speak mother tongue languages, but of course in the primary schools they would beat you for speaking in your language' (Pale Pech 2012). Unsurprisingly, the pressure to homogenize linguistically has been internalized by many indigenous people in Chiapas, even as language remains an icon of indigenous culture in international perception.

In this article, the communities of Izalco, El Salvador, and Acteal, Chiapas, serve as case studies to examine how indigenous peoples and their descendants grapple with language policies and practices in the face of the homogenizing tendencies of states. Both El Salvador and Mexico have long histories of rendering indigenous citizens as mestizos, or mixed-heritage people (Brulotte 2009), to better serve national myths (Gellman 2017), workforce cooptation projects (Yashar 2005), or neoliberal conceptions of modernity. The cases taken together are comparative examples, in different socio-cultural paradigms, of community resistance to homogenizing neoliberal efforts at nation-making. Opposition to neoliberal education need not only have one face, nor one language: in Izalco, it is spoken in Nahuat; and in Acteal, in Tzotzil.

These case studies document the potential for indigenous citizens to reconceive the right to language through formal education on their own terms. Both El Salvador and Mexico are on neoliberal economic and political trajectories, and both states engage in projects of 'linguistic hegemony,' referring to the 'discursive strategies by which language ideologies become generally accepted by the majority of the population' (Sonntag and Cardinal 2015: 8). In other words, state agendas for citizenship production are encoded in policies and practices in the formal education sector that constrain the medium of instruction options that learners find in the classroom. The dominant orientation toward neoliberalism by regimes in both El Salvador and Mexico lumps modernity and capitalist economic growth into a package of goods that includes

AUTHOR'S PRE-PRINT

characteristics such as linguistic ability, with English prized over Spanish, which is in turn prized over indigenous languages. Thus, the social hierarchy is defined, and with it, state agendas for citizenship production.

Despite this common political reality, there are significant variations in the state provisions for indigenous learners across the two states, as well as differences in the kinds of language revitalization projects that civil society groups have created in response to language policies and practices. This article documents how two particular communities are claiming the right to bilingual education in the classroom in the face of educational frameworks that foster ethnic homogenization. Without discounting the importance of informal sector socialization in arenas such as families, communities, religious organizations, and street life, formal education continues to play a significant role in the construction of citizen identity in many countries around the world, including El Salvador and Mexico, with the prestige of being 'educated' serving as a distinct social marker. Despite variation in state-derived obstacles to a heritage tongue medium of instruction in schools, indigenous people in both Mexico and El Salvador have forged ahead with autonomously funded language learning projects in local schools. This article contributes to theorizing how the maintenance of space for indigenous cultural practices in schools affects youth identity formation. For Salvadoran and Mexican youth, I argue, the absence of state commitment to bilingual education undermines democratization efforts by excluding certain types of citizen identities. Contextualizing the history of ethnic minority marginalization in both countries, I analyze ways that indigenous communities have been rendered invisible as citizens unless they are willing to assimilate into dominant mestizo culture.

The article proceeds as follows: I first summarize the processes of homogenization that Mexican and Salvadoran states subjected indigenous citizens to throughout the twentieth century.

AUTHOR'S PRE-PRINT

I then assess the way that mother tongue and heritage tongue education, or their rejection, influences a sense of belonging in the national populace and therefore leads to certain performances of citizenship. Next, I focus on the cases of Izalco, El Salvador, and Acteal, Mexico, and describe the particular language continuity and resuscitation efforts created in each community. I end with reflections on how language policy in formal-sector education can affect the formation of indigenous citizens in neoliberal states.

Histories of homogenization

Benedict Anderson's classic work on nation-building highlights the role of language as a tool of common identity that actors use, through spoken and printed means, to relate to each other and act in concert as a populace (Anderson 1991). Around the world, nation-building projects have historically attempted to assimilate minorities under the guise of accommodating their demands. States sometimes advertise their own programs, such as schools and unions, as *accommodating* marginalized citizens, meaning that they are taking into consideration people's unique needs within their programming, as was the case with corporatism in Mexico throughout much of the twentieth century. In fact, accessing opportunities through formal institutions frequently requires *assimilationist* actions such as using the dominant language or style of dress, practices that have become ubiquitous in El Salvador. Many states institutionalize minority rights under programs that fuse notions of assimilation and accommodation.

Modernist states of the twentieth century dismissed indigenous languages as backward, while neoliberal states of the twenty-first century embed citizens in upward social and economic mobility quests that lead to heritage speakers themselves dismissing heritage languages because there is little perceived tangible benefit in language continuity. Formal sector education plays a formidable role in this process, where language offerings determine future linguistic abilities,

even in El Salvador and Mexico where attendance rates and years completed are low (United Nations Development Programme 2010, 2011), especially among indigenous school-age children (United Nations 2010). In addition to basic skills, schools teach socialization and identity performance. For many, schools are the predominant interface with the state throughout their childhood. In this vein, neoliberal states use schools as conduits of information where states communicate expectations of the social contract to the next generation.

Language policy is a highly political indicator of state-minority relations (Sonntag and Cardinal 2015, 3). For example, the homogenization of language through public education and media is recognized by many scholars as serving nationalist projects that prioritize the ethnic majority and exacerbate the outsider status of minorities (See Breuilly's introduction in Gellner 1983, Hobsbawm 1990, Anderson 1991, Weber 1976). Language is also an intimate conveyor of intergenerational and intra-communal memory and therefore bound to temporally entrenched performances of citizenship. In more concrete terms, over time indigenous citizens will perform citizenship as mestizos because they have learned from previous generations that indigenous identity, often marked through language and dress, casts one as 'backwards,' or otherwise unworthy of state support.

Originario rights in El Salvador

El Salvador's civil war (1980-1992) is generally painted as a class war, with little mention of indigenous people in the country's history from that point forward. A recent surge in research on Salvadorans originarios¹ documents their existence and how they have been rendered invisible

¹ Interviewees were split between those who want to be called *indígenas* because the label comes with rights, and those who want to move away from a legacy of racism by using *pueblos originarios*. Generally, interviewees in Chiapas, Mexico, use *indigenous* while interviewees in El Salvador use *originarios*. I alternate both to accommodate these diverging views and to avoid repetition.

AUTHOR'S PRE-PRINT

(Tilley 2005, Lindo-Fuentes, Ching, and Lara Martínez 2007, Ching and Tilley 1998, DeLugan 2012). Originarios in El Salvador remain poorly addressed by their own government and under-documented in the international community. Estimates by scholars and activists place the total Nahua, Lenca, Kakawira, and Maya populations of El Salvador at between 500,000 and 600,000, or nearly 10 percent of the total population (DeLugan 2012: 70, Peterson 2006: 172, Tilley 2005: 34, 171). While some originario activists rely on self-identification in order to be counted, the legacy of racism has made many incentives for people to not auto-identify, and it is possible that false consciousness among originarios who claim mestizo identity drastically reduces the numbers of communities that should in fact be considered indigenous (Peterson 2006: 172). People may internally identify as indigenous even if they choose to present themselves as non-indigenous because it is seen as a safer option, and over time, such presentation becomes reality.

Although a handful of language revitalization movements are taking place across the country, in general, El Salvador is a case of 'successful' mestizaje discourse, where the state has managed to frame the entire population as having mixed ancestry with no remaining 'real' indigenous peoples. This rendering of the nation as mestizo-only has a direct impact on cultural rights for people who identify outside the mestizo box. After all, this reasoning goes, if there are no indigenous people in the country, then they do not need special recognition in the Constitution, in state laws, or in formal education sector policies. As indigenous rights activists emerge in El Salvador, they find themselves torn between broad petitions for institutional change and implementing local cultural survival projects.

Mexico's assimilationist project

Indigenismo, a bundle of discriminatory policies and practices that upheld the glory of Indian ancestors while categorizing contemporary indigenous citizens as backward, swept Mexico from

AUTHOR'S PRE-PRINT

the 1940s until the early 2000s (Pye and Jolley 2011: 7, Brulotte 2009: 6). Bilingual education was used in a utilitarian fashion in internment schools for young indigenous males, in order to facilitate their transformation into *capacitados*, or indigenous people who have gone through Mexicanization in government training schools. The incentive to transform was made clear: *capacitados* gained privileges usually reserved for European-descendent people (Dawson 2004: 154). Although the internment schools are long dissolved, the use of Spanish language schools as an assimilation tool continues.

The right to language is enshrined in many international legal instruments, including the 1996 Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights, commonly known as the Barcelona Declaration, and the United Nations 2007 Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People.² In today's state-centric societal organization framework, people generally claim rights from states as citizens, or are claiming the right to citizenship itself. Citizens, those members of a national polity who have both rights and duties conferred upon them by the state, can be active or passive participants in the social contract. Social contracts in general are agreements between citizens and states for each party to follow their prescribed rights and duties. But the rights and duties that citizens hold are not fixed, and especially in countries like El Salvador and Mexico that are in political transition toward democracy but frequently regress to non-democratic state behavior, the terms of the social contract can be vague and renegotiated during social movements. The right to mother tongue and heritage language education, although rhetorically enshrined at the international level, remains out of reach for many indigenous citizens in Latin America and around the world.

² See <http://www.unesco.org/most/ln2int.htm#UN> for a list of legal instruments for linguistic rights.

Language learning in El Salvador

In El Salvador, the erosion over time of originario languages has undermined the maintenance of minority identities and signifies cultural non-accommodation by the state. National policies of homogenization, including Spanish-only education, chip away at indigenous culture, and this has had both short- and long-term effects on cultural maintenance and group identity. Most immediately, originario children are not socialized into the songs, rituals, and stories of their grandparents and ancestors. In the long run, the sense of shame around indigeneity is maintained as few spokespeople emerge in civil society to challenge the notion that one can be both educated *and* indigenous, or culturally connected to indigenous practices *and* a Salvadoran citizen.

In El Salvador, two significant state actors in policy and practice of cultural rights writ large are the Ministry of Education (MINED) and the National Council for Culture and Art (CONCULTURA). Under previous governments, the national myth of mestizaje was preeminent in both institutions and originarios found few opportunities to express ethnic identities outside of their communities or in non-tokenistic ways. As in Mexico, state cultural promotion romanticized ancient indigenous histories at the expense of contemporary indigenous communities (DeLugan 2012: 41-43). This approach was reflected by MINED in history books that only mentioned indigenous people up to the early twentieth century but not afterward (Gellman and Bellino 2019, 10-12).

Some meaningful shifts in national approaches to culture have been achieved since the former leftist guerilla-turned political party, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), came into power in El Salvador in 2009. An originario activist group pressed the topic of intercultural and bilingual education on FMLN presidential candidate Mauricio Funes prior to

AUTHOR'S PRE-PRINT

his 2009 victory, declaring it a component of originario claims (Anonymous 2012). Once President (2009-2014), Funes transformed the old Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA)-directed institution of the CONCULTURA into a more autonomous Secretary of Culture, replete with its own Indigenous Affairs office. The second FMLN President (2014-) Salvador Sánchez Cerén, who was Vice President under Funes and a past FMLN guerilla leader and school teacher himself, has also supported modest pro-indigenous reforms. However, FMLN leadership is by no means a solution to indigenous invisibility. The party itself framed the civil war as a class war and its current policies continue to focus mostly on class issues at the expense of other identity claims. It is unclear as of this writing whether Nayib Bukele's presidency, set to begin on June 1st 2019, will change life for indigenous Salvadorans in any significant way.

Educative practices are integral in citizen formation, itself a key process in democratization, and education serves as a feedback loop to empower ethnic minorities in mobilization for cultural rights (Gellman and Bellino 2019, 4). As people see their own stories included in official curriculum, they may feel more entitled to demand identity-based rights, but curriculum revisions frequently only result after substantial pressure from civil society or external actors such as international human rights organizations (Gellman and Bellino 2019, 14-18). Yet even with government agencies more sympathetic to originario claims than under previous administrations, it is unlikely that intercultural or bilingual education will be incorporated by the MINED anytime soon. A MINED policy-maker stated that indigenous people were too dispersed to justify creating a bilingual or intercultural curriculum (Samour 2012). Such a stance is an obstacle to promoting heritage languages in the formal education sector, especially as it maintains the status quo of resource allotment for schools.

AUTHOR'S PRE-PRINT

Originario activists, however, have made clear that a small population size does not diminish their demand for the cultural right to learn their language (Anonymous 2012). Yet their path forward to gain increased cultural rights in the formal education sector is not clear, particularly as El Salvador continues to face grave social problems of human insecurity that dominate conversations about service delivery. While the CONCULTURA and the Houses of Culture were part of a nation-building homogenization project, current gang violence and struggles over reintegrating deportees from the United States take precedence over concerns about indigenous language rights. In sum, as in Mexico, through discourses and practices of mestizaje that manifest as racist shaming of originarios, indigenous Salvadorans frequently access citizenship by diminishing their indigenous selves through schoolroom and general societal assimilation.

Mexico's language regime

Although mother tongue languages are now gaining recognition in Mexico and in international solidarity communities as being vital to cultural expression, indigenous languages have been oppressed in Mexico for generations (Vázquez Álvarez 2012, Maldonado Alverado 2010: 13, Meyer and Soberanes Bojórquez 2010). While more recently the idea of state-nations, or states composed of many different nations, has gained traction as a model more supportive of genuine democratic practices that include minorities (Stepan, Linz, and Yadav 2011), in El Salvador and Mexico, the conception of the nation-state as a developmental goal persists.

One effect of the nation-state as teleological is the design of what Sonntag and Cardinal (2015, 4-5), drawing on Jenson's use of the concept 'citizenship regime,' term 'language regimes' to define how state policies and notions of language use are embedded institutionally.

AUTHOR'S PRE-PRINT

Language regimes constrain language options structurally while acknowledging that individual agency through language claim-making may still be possible (Sonntag and Cardinal 2015: 4-5). States form their own language regimes depending on their social policy goals. Since the 1980s, Mexico has embraced neoliberalism as an organizing concept for economic and social planning, and with it, the notion that the duty of the education sector is to prepare citizens for the marketplace, which is becoming increasingly English-dominated. This dovetails with Mexico's history of assimilationist corporatism that rendered indigenous languages not useful in Spanish, mestizo identity. Essentially, these forces led to Spanish language education with mandatory or elective English classes depending on the level and type of schooling.

Mexico's language landscape is inextricably bound up in its history of *indigenismo*, or discourse and philosophy of the relationship between indigenous peoples and the state that was put forward by non-indigenous people. Sometimes this was done out of real sympathy for the plight of indigenous people, as in the case of Catholic friar Bartolomé de las Casas during his work in Chiapas in the sixteenth century (de Las Casas 1877). In the twentieth century, complex relationships between indigenous people and the state were woven in different eras by a range of actors who saw themselves in solidarity with indigenous people or were indigenous themselves, although this support was only available for certain kinds of indigenous people and under particular conditions (Muñoz 2016, Dawson 1998).

The 1991 Mexican constitutional reform of Article 4 acknowledged the multicultural composition of Mexico for the first time. Further constitutional reform in 2001 brought a general amendment on indigenous rights, which was followed in 2003 by the General Law on the Linguistic Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Hamel 2008: 306-7). Implementation of these laws is controlled through multiple institutions, including, but not limited to, the General Coordination

AUTHOR'S PRE-PRINT

of Intercultural, Bilingual Education (CGEIB) and the General Department for Indigenous Education (DGEI), both of which are run by the Secretariat of Public Education (SEP). Both institutions constitute elements of Mexico's language regime and are informed by an underlying commitment to nation-building through linguistic homogenization, which itself is based on racist premises. The language regime maintains a façade of multiculturalism through these bilingual intercultural education programs, when in reality they are poorly designed and implemented programs that mostly produce monolingual Spanish-speaking citizens (Hamel 2008: 304-30-6).

The SEP negotiates education policies with the powerful Mexican National Educational Workers Union (SNTE), which has been at times extremely corrupt but also defends workers rights (Cook 1996, Ornelas 2008). At both federal and state levels, the SNTE and the SEP continue to fail in improving education for indigenous citizens and have been key players in subnational authoritarian regimes in places like Chiapas. The SNTE cannot provide appropriate bilingual, intercultural education given numerous logistical challenges, including insufficient training and lack of materials, and furthermore its system of seniority does not facilitate matching teachers to communities who speak the same indigenous language (Gellman 2017: 49). Also, as standardized tests have been embraced as core assessment tools of teacher performance by the SEP, there is minimal space for intercultural curricula that does not appear on the tests (Gellman 2017: 49). As in many other countries, histories of discrimination disempower rights advocates for pushing back against state policies, as they can sometimes be targeted. This was seen as recently as 2014 with the disappearance and murder of 43 mostly indigenous-descendent students at the Ayotzinapa Rural Teacher's College in Guerrero. While committed by non-state actors, the violence against student protestors was facilitated by local government officials and sent a message to other indigenous educators and students to stay quiet or be targeted.

Mexico faces numerous challenges in improving its language regime to account for the needs of ethnic minorities, including addressing the training, curricula, assessments, and placements of bilingual, intercultural teachers, as well as consulting about the linguistic needs and preferences of originarios. Ultimately, the slippery element of political will comes into play, as Mexican politicians may only find it beneficial to improve bilingual, intercultural education if there is sufficient domestic or international pressure to do so. Otherwise, schools may continue as sites of assimilation that serve an ongoing neoliberal agenda, preparing students for workforces that reward English or Spanish language skills, but certainly not indigenous ones.

Reviving Nahuat in Neoliberal El Salvador

Izalco in the Nahuat language means ‘place of the obsidian,’ which nods to the town’s proximity to the volcano of the same name. Izalco has many of the trappings of an average Salvadoran small town, with most residents wearing wash-and-wear factory-made clothing, speaking Spanish, and going to one of the many local churches. But Izalco’s apparent normalcy covers up an intense racial division that appears if visitors linger and move beyond the main plaza. Deep-rooted historical segregation marks the uphill part of town, near the main church and plaza as the territory of fair-skinned mestizos, or ladinos of mixed heritage but with evident colonial Spanish ties, while originarios live downhill and across the highway in more rustic abodes. People mix in markets, churches, and schools, but there are clear racial divisions that are only recently being discussed (Gellman 2017: 135).

Approximately 20,000 people call Izalco home, and it is one of a small handful of recognizable indigenous-influenced communities in El Salvador. In 1932, Izalco was the epicenter of a large-scale military orchestrated massacre of the Salvadoran left, in which between

AUTHOR'S PRE-PRINT

10,000 and 30,000 people were killed (Lindo-Fuentes, Ching, and Lara Martínez 2007: 2, Tilley 2005: 31, Ching 1998: 206). Indigenous people and those affiliated with the Communist party or any other labor organization were particularly targeted. Although it is still unclear to what degree the massacre directly induced indigenous people to assimilate into mestizo culture for self-protection (Gellman 2017: 136-7), the narrative that the events of 1932 led to the loss of indigenous language and dress is maintained in many Salvadoran indigenous communities, as well as by the state itself (Government of El Salvador 2005). While Gould and Lauria-Santiago (2008: 258-259) look to the 1960s and 1970s as the more critical time period for originarios cultural loss in El Salvador, the dominant popular narrative maintains a different story. Regardless, what is evident is that throughout the twentieth century ladinos in positions of power targeted and shamed originarios for a range of cultural practices, and in response, originarios dropped markers of indigeneity as a means of self-protection. This cultural domination has played out in the schools as well as on the street.

Education in El Salvador, like all state-provided goods in this centralized state, is controlled from offices in the capital, San Salvador. There is minimal decentralization of power to departments, meaning districts within the state. Rather, the approach and curriculum are homogenous across departments. Izalco's primary school, 'Mario Calvo Marroquín,' is all the more novel in this context for being one of the few places in El Salvador where children can learn the Nahuat language. This is due in most part to the determination of former School Director and Nahuat language activist Juliana Ama de Chile, granddaughter of one of the indigenous leaders of the 1932 uprising, who has been a significant memory-keeper in the community. Ama de Chile created numerous avenues to re-dignify indigenous identity in the public school and the community at large, including the considerable feat of convincing enough

AUTHOR'S PRE-PRINT

families to pool resources and contribute to the salary of the Nahuat language teacher. As the Salvadoran Ministry of Education for years refused to cover that expense for the school, community collaboration was a vital step in revitalizing the Nahuat language.

So what does Nahuat language revival in Izalco tell us about the educational and political landscape in El Salvador? In general, the country has been afflicted by the same neoliberal economic package, sometimes triumphantly heralded as a globalization process that will bring modernity and democratization, that was laid out for Global South countries in the last part of the twentieth century (Almeida 2008: 175). The role of neoliberal citizen production became particularly evident in the post-Peace Accords era, following the technical resolution of the civil war in 1992. El Salvador has been a textbook case of post-war neoliberal economic reform, in part because the governing right wing pro-business ARENA party that was in power during the war and afterward until 2009 made such reforms the core of its agenda (Almeida 2008: 184-6). From 1995-2005 the Ministry of Education underwent a 10-year reform process that followed the dominant international neoliberal economic model (Cuéllar-Marchelli 2003: 2). The result has been a focus on producing Salvadoran citizens for the global marketplace, made explicit by the dollarization of the Salvadoran economy in 2001.

From privatization of previously nationally run enterprises to austerity measures that cut social spending in order to trim the national budget, neoliberal practices inform the running of the state and affect Salvadorans in a range of ways (Sánchez 2000: 366, Silber 2004: 562, Almeida 2008: 182). Policies may be couched in the language of promoting self-reliance rather than state dependence, but the overarching approach to Salvadoran governance, including education policy, focuses on modernizing. Given high rates of migration to the United States, as well as a local economy dominated by multinational corporations, this means making bilingual

AUTHOR'S PRE-PRINT

Spanish-English-speaking citizens. The Nahuat language is not useful in call centers, which have become the new industry in San Salvador, where bilingual Salvadorans deported from the United States provide English-language technical services to customers back in the United States (Blitzer 2017). Call center jobs are painted as alternatives to street life for post-deportation citizens, and few are willing to challenge the hegemony of English as neoliberal imposition when MS-13 and Barrio 18, El Salvador's two most notorious gangs, are presented as the fate for those without English skills. In this zero sum game, indigenous language rights are not seen as a priority.

In this context, it is hardly fair to blame the Salvadoran education system as being single-handedly responsible for the loss of indigenous languages. Many other processes contribute to citizen formation in detrimental ways, including a history of denying the existence of indigenous people at the highest levels of government (Peterson 2007: 68), rampant impunity following widespread human rights violations (United Nations Commission on the Truth for El Salvador et al. 1993), and a contemporary migration and deportation cycle that feeds US-owned businesses in San Salvador a steady stream of low-paid bilingual employees (Blitzer 2017). But the education sector is not without blame. Like many countries swept up in neoliberal education models, high test scores continue to be prioritized over critical thinking skills. Like much of education in Latin America and the Global South in general, social hierarchy is maintained through cultures of memorization and subservience to teachers rather than collaborative engagement. The fact that education takes place only in Spanish, despite demands for heritage languages such as Nahuat, Lenca, and Kakawira to be taught in schools, is just one aspect of a larger conversation about how Salvadoran citizens should be educated for the twenty-first century.

Tzotzil survival in neoliberal Mexico

Like Oaxaca, Guerrero, and the Yucatan, Chiapas is one of Mexico's most indigenous states, with approximately one million indigenous residents in a population of 3.5 million people. It is also Mexico's poorest state (Levy et al. 2016: 1). There is an abundant literature looking at the political and economic effects of neoliberalism in Chiapas, and on indigenous people in particular (Levy et al. 2016: 4, Jung 2008: 66, Esteva 2003: 250, Moksnes 2012: 33-59). This section looks at education policy in one community, Acteal, in the Chiapas highlands, as a case study of the intersection between indigenous rights and the state agenda for citizen production.

Tzotzil, a Mayan language, includes at least seven dialectical variations and has 487,898 speakers aged three years and older, with the majority of them concentrated in Chiapas (INALI 2015a). According to Mexico's National Institute of Indigenous Languages (INALI), as of 2015, 33.7 percent of the total population of Tzotzils speak only Tzotzil, while the remaining 66.3 percent also speak Spanish (INALI 2015b). This makes Tzotzil the Maya language with the most non-Spanish speakers based on percentage of the population (INALI 2015b). Given the deeply rooted use of indigenous languages in Chiapas, it is worth exploring further how language has embedded itself in the political fabric of the state.

Longtime activist and scholar Gustavo Esteva describes the state-building project of the Mexican elite as 'defining a fictitious people made up of abstract individuals' based on the generic categories of citizen defined in the Mexican Constitution that can change to fit various ideologies (Esteva 2003: 244). He critiques that elites 'not only refused to recognize the existence of the real peoples and cultures that constitute the country but failed to conceive of a state or a nation founded on its own terms' (Esteva 2003: 244-5). This scenario, with elite notions of citizenship as homogenous, generic, and malleable, inevitably clashes with *Mexico*

AUTHOR'S PRE-PRINT

Profundo, or deep Mexico, meaning traditional Mexico that is derived from indigenous cosmovision (Esteva 2003: 246). On the one hand, the Zapatista movement of Chiapas with which Esteva has been deeply involved does not ask for state recognition, and in fact upholds its autonomy from it. On the other hand, even Zapatista communities that are autonomous in a variety of ways are still embedded in state networks of things like roads, consumer goods, and international networks. For my purposes here, I focus on the conflict between these two camps to highlight different orientations toward citizenship in the case of Acteal.

A Tzotzil village in the highlands of Chiapas, Acteal is divided into three sub-communities, and I present here a project of one faction, *Las Abejas* (The Bees). Sympathetic to the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), *Las Abejas* may have overlapping membership with the EZLN portion of Acteal, but form an independent organization. *Las Abejas* formed in 1992 in response to a local gender-based conflict over the right for women to inherit property (*Las Abejas* 2018). Following the 1997 massacre of 45 Acteal residents, including many women and children, by a state-funded death squad, *Las Abejas* are now organized in 29 communities across the Chiapas highlands, including Tzotzil and Tseltal-speaking areas (Mesa Directiva de *Las Abejas* 2012: 215-226, *Las Abejas* 2018, Moksnes 2012). *Las Abejas* advocate liberation theology, non-violent resistance to Mexican military occupation, and cultural and political rights. They call for the protection of the “*buen vivir*,” or good life, as defined by them (*Las Abejas* 2018). Where the state has not protected the right to live their version of a good life, *Las Abejas* have called for cultural autonomy.

Indigenous communities in Chiapas have declared autonomy in a variety of ways, including from traditional political parties, with communities opting to use *usos y costumbres*, or traditions and customs, including for leadership selection and voluntary communal work, to run

AUTHOR'S PRE-PRINT

their villages (Moksnes 2012: 52-4, Jung 2008: 201). While the town of Acteal contains people of various political identities, some of whom send their children to the nearby state elementary school that is run in Spanish, other residents have organized around the lack of Tzotzil-language education available for their children. In theory, state-run schools in predominantly indigenous communities, prior to the 2013 educational reforms that traded a bilingual, intercultural agenda for so-called inclusive education, were mandated to provide bilingual education. However, teachers' union politics and teacher placement hierarchies meant that more frequently, schools with high proportions of indigenous language speaking students ended up with courses given in Spanish because of either indigenous language mismatch between students and teachers (Gellman 2017: 49), or the general dominance of state assimilation agendas (Trejo 2012: 211). Many Las Abejas members rejected the government-funded school in their area during the 2000s, claiming that it operated as a Castilianization tool and method of indoctrination into mestizo culture.

In collaboration with members of the EZLN in Acteal, in 2001 Las Abejas founded an autonomous bilingual primary school on the edge of their town that is taught by community members fluent in Tzotzil. The Las Abejas Board of Directors, in addition to the local governing committee of the EZLN, oversee the functioning of the autonomous school, including the hiring of its teachers (Mesa Directiva de Las Abejas 2012). Because Las Abejas previously saw their demands for things like education transformed into additional means to assimilate indigenous peoples, the community reframed this claim in line with principles of autonomy.

The autonomous school project is not without its problems. Mexican education offices at both state and federal levels do not recognize the autonomous school, so students receive credits that are not transferable outside of the autonomous school system – however, the EZLN has now

created an autonomous school system that runs through college (Mesa Directiva de Las Abejas 2012), so this limitation affects students who want to go outside the network. Community accountability for the school is high, with community-selected teachers utilizing a community-approved curriculum (Mesa Directiva de Las Abejas 2012). While this solution is not ideal, in that students in the autonomous school may leave as bilingual Tzotzil-Spanish speakers but without the benefits of a wider range of options in their schooling and futures, the autonomous school nonetheless represents a creative response to the hegemony of the neoliberal Mexican state agenda that continues to promote mestizo, Spanish-speaking citizenship at the expense of indigenous identity.

Conclusion: Language rights in a globalized world

Like the Marroquin school in Izalco, El Salvador, the Acteal school in Mexico stands out as an exemplar of a language rights movement embodied at the grassroots level. While the Izalco school focused on language revitalization through heritage language teaching, the Acteal school addresses language continuity, as most children arrive fluent in Tzotzil and are introduced to Spanish for the first time in the classroom. The difference between the two agendas is rooted in the historical contexts and legacies of each community in relation to the language regime that has emanated from the state level. While the discourse of mestizaje ‘succeeded’ in El Salvador, Acteal, Chiapas has held out as an indigenous stronghold despite centuries of assimilationist policies that have only intensified under twenty-first century neoliberalism.

Both Nahuat and Tzotzil language rights activists have focused on mother and heritage tongue education as a tangible symbol of indigenous recognition because they understand that (non-)representation of originario language and culture in schools is an indicator of a state stance

AUTHOR'S PRE-PRINT

toward indigenous citizens. In El Salvador the journey to recognition is nascent and it may take significant time for the MINED to get on board. In Mexico, despite more than a decade of legal provisions for indigenous rights, the reality of SEP and SNTE practices continue to constrain the right to mother tongue language education. Interestingly, in El Salvador, where there is little state promise of rights for originarios, the Nahua community in Izalco has persistently directed their claims for support at the state, even as they mobilize community resources to avoid delaying language programming. In contrast, although Mexico provides legal and policy guarantees for language rights at both the national and state levels, Las Abejas have instead chosen to frame their language rights project as an autonomy project. While certainly the historical presence of the EZLN in Chiapas should be considered while accounting for this difference, it also serves as a reminder that simply expanding state protections on paper for indigenous citizens may not facilitate rights projects that truly engage the state. Rather, the larger social and historical context of each country and originario population factors into decisions about how best to preserve indigenous languages.

Language policy in the schools, as a symbolic and practical space for language regime enactment, directly impacts citizen formation. Such policies serve as tangible representations of larger conflicts between indigenous and mestizo people regarding practices of cultural hegemony that have become encoded in neoliberal economic and political practices. State policies and practices in the formal education sector encourage ethnic homogenization over support for diversity as states try to produce more workers for the global labor market. Such tension is unfolding in the framework of democratization, a transitional time that ostensibly should make the social contract more available for negotiation by previously disenfranchised citizens. Originarios in tentative democratizing states like El Salvador and Mexico may look to education

AUTHOR'S PRE-PRINT

as a means to overcome their second class citizen status, but the way states form citizens through formal education are frequently immersed in discourses of mestizaje that perpetuate the need to assimilate in order to access rights.

Denying the right to indigenous language education, whether through poor implementation and enforcement of quality bilingual, intercultural education programs, as in Mexico, or by negating their relevance in the first place, as in El Salvador, furthers a neoliberal vision of the world as culturally homogenous and composed of consumers and producers rather than culturally unique beings. Where states do not promote effective institutional management of bilingual education programs, the do-it-yourself option remains a means to language retention or resuscitation. The Marroquín school in Izalco, El Salvador, and the autonomous school in Acteal, Mexico, showcase the promises and pitfalls of this approach. The lack of financial support in Izalco means the Nahuat program is continually on the verge of collapse, and the lack of official accreditation for Acteal's autonomous school limits the options of its graduates to access the full range of professional choices once they age out of the autonomous school system.

While these issues remain real obstacles for each school, the ability of students to learn their heritage language or in their mother tongue is an integral part of a larger indigenous rights platform. In turn, the formation of rights claims, and mobilizing for their implementation, poignantly connects to a model of engaged citizenship in which originarios help set the terms of their inclusion in a polity that constantly tries to revert back to neoliberal citizenship. The future may very well be one of market-driven cost-benefit analyses of language hierarchies that make schools and families determine which languages are the most economically or socially advantageous to acquire. However, in some indigenous communities, people are willing to

contest such a fate as given and forge alternatives that allow for cultural continuity and indigenous rights in the formal education sector.

Works Cited

- Almeida, Paul. 2008. *Waves of Protest: Popular Struggle in El Salvador, 1925-2005*. Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Anderson, Benedict. 1991. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London; New York: Verso.
- Anonymous. 2012. Employee of Consejo Coordinador Nacional Indígena Del Salvador (CCNIS). Interview with author. El Salvador. 4/16/12.
- Blitzer, Jonathan. 2017. "Deportees Taking Our Calls." *The New Yorker* January 23rd, 2017: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/01/23/the-deportees-taking-our-calls>.
- Brulotte, Ronda. 2009. "'Yo soy nativo de aquí'": The Ambiguities of Race and Indigeneity in Oaxacan Craft Tourism." *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* 14 (2):457-482.
- Ching, Erik. 1998. "In Search of the Party: The Communist Party, the Comintern, and the Peasant Rebellion of 1932 in El Salvador." *The Americas* 55 (2):204-239.
- Ching, Erik, and Virginia Tilley. 1998. "Indians, the Military and the Rebellion of 1932 in El Salvador." *Journal of Latin American Studies* 30 (1):121-156.
- Cook, Maria Lorena. 1996. *Organizing Dissent: Unions, the State, and the Democratic Teachers' Movement in Mexico*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Cuéllar-Marchelli, Helga. 2003. "Decentralization and Privatization of Education in El Salvador: Assessing the Experience." *International Journal of Educational Development* 23 (2):145-166.
- Dawson, Alexander S. 1998. "From Models for the Nation to Model Citizens: Indigenismo and the 'Revindication' of the Mexican Indian, 1920-40." *Journal of Latin American Studies* 30 (2):279-308.
- Dawson, Alexander S. 2004. *Indian and Nation in Revolutionary Mexico*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- de Las Casas, Bartolomé. 1877. *Historia de las Indias*. Vol. 1: Imprenta y litografía de I. Paz.
- DeLugan, Robin Maria. 2012. *Reimagining National Belonging: Post-civil War El Salvador in a Global Context*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Esteva, Gustavo. 2003. "The Meaning and Scope of the Struggle for Autonomy." In *Mayan Lives, Mayan Utopias: The Indigenous Peoples of Chiapas and the Zapatista Rebellion*, edited by Jan Rus, Rosalva Aída Hernández Castillo and Shannon Mattiace, 243-269. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Gellman, Mneasha. 2017. *Democratization and Memories of Violence: Ethnic Minority Rights Movements in Mexico, Turkey, and El Salvador, Global Cooperation*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Gellman, Mneasha, and Michelle Bellino. 2019, forthcoming. "Fighting Invisibility: Indigenous Citizens and History Education in El Salvador and Guatemala." *Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies*.
- Gellner, Ernest. 1983. *Nations and Nationalism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

AUTHOR'S PRE-PRINT

- Gould, Jeffrey L., and Aldo Lauria-Santiago. 2008. *To Rise in Darkness: Revolution, Repression, and Memory in El Salvador, 1920-1932*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Government of El Salvador. 2005. "Izalco webpage. Ministry of Tourism. <http://www.tourism.com.sv/destinations/izalco.php>."
- Hamel, Rainer Enrique. 2008. "Indigenous Language Policy and Education in Mexico." In *Encyclopedia of Language and Education*, 301-313. United States: Springer.
- Hobsbawm, Eric J. 1990. *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality, The Wiles lectures*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.
- INALI. 2015a. Catálogo de Idiomas: Maya 1B. Available at: https://site.inali.gob.mx/Micrositios/estadistica_basica/estadisticas2015/pdf/familias/maya/maya1B.pdf: Government of Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Lenguas Indígenas.
- INALI. 2015b. Catálogo de Idiomas: Maya 3. Available at: https://site.inali.gob.mx/Micrositios/estadistica_basica/estadisticas2015/pdf/familias/maya/maya3.pdf: Government of Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Lenguas Indígenas.
- Jung, Courtney. 2008. *The Moral Force of Indigenous Politics: Critical Liberalism and the Zapatistas*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Las Abejas. 2018. Las Abejas de Acteal: Sitio Web de la Sociedad Civil Las Abejas. Available at: <http://acteal.blogspot.com/p/historia-de-las-abejas.html>.
- Levy, Dan, Ricardo Hausmann, Miguel Angel Santos, Luis Espinoza, and Miguel Flores. 2016. "Why Is Chiapas Poor?" CID Working Paper No. 300. Available at: <https://growthlab.cid.harvard.edu/publications/why-chiapas-poor>.
- Lindo-Fuentes, Héctor, Erik Kristofer Ching, and Rafael Lara Martínez. 2007. *Remembering a Massacre in El Salvador: The Insurrection of 1932, Roque Dalton, and the Politics of Historical Memory*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
- Maldonado Alverado, Benjamin. 2010. "Comunidad, comunalidad y colonialismo en Oaxaca, México: La nueva educación comunitaria y su contexto." PhD Thesis, Anthropology Department, Leiden University.
- Mesa Directiva de Las Abejas. 2012. Interview with author. Acteal, Chiapas, Mexico. 4/3/12.
- Meyer, Lois M., and Fernando Soberanes Bojórquez. 2010. *El Nido de Lengua: Orientación Para Sus Guías*. México: CMPIO-CNEII-CSEIIIO.
- Moksnes, Heidi. 2012. *Maya Exodus: Indigenous Struggle for Citizenship in Chiapas*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Muñoz, María Leonor Olin. 2016. *Stand Up and Fight: Participatory Indigenismo, Populism, and Mobilization in Mexico, 1970-1984*. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press.
- Ornelas, Carlos. 2008. "El SNTE, Elba Esther Gordillo y el Gobierno de Calderón." *Revista Mexicana de Investigación Educativa* 13 (37):445-469.
- Pale Pech, Nicolas. 2012. Tzotzil and Spanish teacher, Tierras Mayas Spanish School. Huixtán community member. Interview with author. San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico. 3/9/12.
- Peterson, Brandt G. 2006. "Consuming Histories: The Return of the Indian in Neoliberal El Salvador." *Cultural Dynamics* 18 (2):163-188.
- Peterson, Brandt G. 2007. "Remains out of place: Race, trauma and nationalism in El Salvador." *Anthropological Theory* 7 (1):59-77.
- Pye, GERALYN, and David Jolley. 2011. "Indigenous Mobilization in Oaxaca, Mexico: Towards Indianismo?" *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Research* 17 (2):179-195.

AUTHOR'S PRE-PRINT

- Samour, Héctor. 2012. Vice Minister of Education. Interview with author. San Salvador, El Salvador. 4/16/12.
- Sánchez, Carol M. 2000. "Motives for Corporate Philanthropy in El Salvador: Altruism and Political Legitimacy." *Journal of Business Ethics* 27 (4):363-375.
- Silber, Irina Carlota. 2004. "Mothers/Fighters/Citizens: Violence and Disillusionment in Post-War El Salvador." *Gender & History* 16 (3):561-587.
- Sonntag, Selma K., and Linda Cardinal. 2015. "State Traditions and Language Regimes: Conceptualizing Language Policy Choices." In *State Traditions and Language Regimes*, edited by Selma K. Sonntag and Linda Cardinal, 3-26. McGill: Queen's University Press.
- Stepan, Alfred C., Juan J. Linz, and Yogendra Yadav. 2011. *Crafting State-Nations: India and other multinational democracies*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Tilley, Virginia. 2005. *Seeing Indians: A Study of Race, Nation, and Power in El Salvador*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
- Trejo, Guillermo. 2012. *Popular Movements in Autocracies: Religion, Repression, and Indigenous Collective Action in Mexico*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- United Nations. 2010. Press Release: State of the World's Indigenous Peoples. http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/SOWIP_Press_package.pdf: United Nations.
- United Nations Commission on the Truth for El Salvador, Belisario Bentancur, Reinaldo Figueredo Planchart, and Thomas Buergenthal. 1993. *From Madness to Hope: The 12-year war in El Salvador, Report of the Commission on the Truth for El Salvador*. New York: United Nations.
- United Nations Development Programme. 2010. International Human Development Indicators - Mexico. Accessed 7/11/11. Available at <http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/MEX.html>.
- United Nations Development Programme. 2011. International Human Development Indicators - El Salvador. Accessed 1/20/13. Available at <http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/SLV.html>.
- Vázquez Álvarez, Juan Jesús. 2012. Linguist and Professor, Escuela de Gestión y Autodesarrollo Indígena, Universidad Autónoma de Chiapas (UNACH). Interview with author. San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico. 3/20/12
- Weber, Eugene Joseph. 1976. *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernisation of Rural France, 1870-1914*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Yashar, Deborah J. 2005. *Contesting Citizenship in Latin America: The Rise of Indigenous Movements and the Postliberal Challenge*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.