



Association of Mexican American Educators Journal

Volume 13 Issue 2

A peer-reviewed, open access
journal

2019

AMAE Special Issue

Critical Latinx Indigeneities and Education

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**Linguistic Motherwork in the Zapotec Diaspora:
Zapoteca Mothers' Perspectives on Indigenous Language Maintenance**

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Abstract

This article explores Indigenous Mexican mothers' perspectives on multilingualism and Indigenous language maintenance in their children's lives. Drawing on interview data from a larger qualitative study of language and ideology among multilingual children in Los Angeles, California, the article examines the perspectives of four Zapotec mothers who have children in a local public school with a Spanish-English dual language program. The interview data highlight what these women *think* and *do* with respect to the maintenance of the Zapotec language in the lives of their school-aged children. Critical Latinx Indigeneities and the feminist notion of *linguistic motherwork* are used to highlight the intersectional nature of these women's efforts to construct and sustain indigeneity in diaspora.

Key Words: *Indigeneity; Multilingualism; Gender; Zapotec; Indigenous language maintenance*

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.24974/amae.13.2.431>

Introduction

Zenaida: *Cuando yo llegué aquí, no sabía hablar tanto español.* (When I arrived here, I didn't speak much Spanish.)

Ramón: *¿Cuándo llegó a Estados Unidos?* (When you arrived in the United States?)

Zenaida: *Sí, cuando yo llegué aquí, sabía mucho más de mi idioma que español. Pero yo acá llegué aprendiendo español y un poquito de inglés.* (Yes, when I arrived here, I knew more of my language than Spanish. But here I started learning Spanish and a little English.)

The quotation above is from an interview with Zenaida¹, an Indigenous Mexican woman who is raising children in the United States. In the interview excerpt, Zenaida reveals that she did not speak much Spanish before moving to Los Angeles, California from the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca. As she explains, it was only here in the United States that she learned Spanish, as well as some English. When she first immigrated here, Zenaida spoke more of what she calls “my language,” by which she is referring to Zapotec—or *Zapoteco*—the language spoken by the Zapotec people of southern Mexico.

In this article, we explore Indigenous Mexican mothers' perspectives on Indigenous heritage language maintenance in their children's lives. Drawing on interview data from a larger qualitative study of language and ideology among multilingual children in Los Angeles, California, we examine the perspectives of four Zapotec-origin—or *Zapoteca*—mothers who have children in a local public school with a Spanish-English dual language program. The interview data highlight what these women *think* and *do* with respect to the maintenance of Zapoteco in the lives of their school-aged children.

We draw on a Critical Latinx Indigeneities (Blackwell, Lopez, & Urrieta, 2017; Saldaña-Portillo, 2017) framework in order to situate these women's perspectives and experiences within longer histories and overlapping contexts of colonialism and colonality across the racialized geographies of Mexico and the United States. Building on linguistic anthropological scholarship on *language ideologies* (Irvine & Gal, 2000; Kroskrity, 2004; Silverstein, 1979), we examine these women's attitudes and beliefs about the maintenance of Zapoteco in relation to

¹ All participant names are pseudonyms.

larger societal and institutional structures, processes, and discourses. In particular, we draw on the feminist notion of *linguistic motherwork* (Ek, Sánchez, & Quijada Cerecer, 2013) to frame the ways that these Indigenous mothers' language ideologies get embodied and enacted in their reported language socialization practices, and to highlight the intersectional nature of their work constructing and sustaining indigeneity in diaspora.

Indigenous Latinx Families and U.S. Schools

There is a growing population of Indigenous Latin American migrants, particularly from Mexico and Central America, here in the United States. As these Indigenous Latinx migrants raise families in this country, their children increasingly come into contact with U.S. educational institutions (Urrieta, Mesinas, & Martínez, this issue). Despite their growing numbers in U.S. schools, however, Indigenous Latinx children are often rendered invisible (Machado-Casas, 2009; Martínez, 2017; Perez, Vasquez, & Buriel, 2016; Urrieta, 2013). Unfortunately, when Indigenous Latinx children are recognized in U.S. schools, this recognition often takes the form of overt discrimination, stigmatization, and social marginalization (Barillas-Chón, 2010; Machado-Casas, 2009; Ruiz & Barajas, 2012).

Researchers, including the contributors to this special issue, have helped to shed light on the educational experiences of Indigenous Latinx parents and children in the United States (Barillas-Chón, 2010; López & Irizarry, 2019; Mesinas & Perez, 2016; Ruiz & Barajas, 2012; Urrieta, 2013; Vasquez, 2012). While some of this research has focused specifically on Indigenous Mexican mothers' ideologies related to language and education (Velasco, 2014), as well as on the relationship between schooling and maintenance of the Zapotec language (Pérez Báez, 2012), the growing presence of Indigenous Latinx students in U.S. schools and their continued erasure from educational discourse and policy warrant additional inquiry into their educational experiences. Of particular interest to us in this article are the diverse multilingual practices, experiences, and perspectives of Zapoteca mothers who raise children attending U.S. schools. Because these mothers and their children are positioned as "part of a 'Latino' or 'Mexican' population that is assumed to be linguistically and ethnoracially homogeneous" (Martínez, 2017, p. 87), their indigeneity and their Indigenous languages are effectively erased. They are "essentialized and racialized as 'Latino,' and imagined to be *only* bilingual" (Martínez, 2017, p. 87). In this article, we seek to disrupt these forms of erasure by contributing to a more robust and critical understanding of Indigenous Latinx families. In particular, we hope to

contribute to deeper and more nuanced understandings of Zapoteca mothers' perspectives on the maintenance of the Zapotec language in their children's lives.

Framing Indigenous Linguistic Motherwork

Our inquiry into the perspectives of Zapoteca mothers is grounded in the linguistic anthropological literature on *language ideologies*—or socially situated attitudes, beliefs, and feelings about language (Silverstein, 1979). A key insight from this literature is the notion that language ideologies can be both *articulated* and *embodied* (Kroskrity, 2004). We are particularly interested in how these mothers' perspectives on Indigenous language maintenance get embodied in their *language socialization* practices—or the ways they socialize their children *through* language and *to use* language (Kulick & Schieffelin, 2004; Ochs & Schieffelin, 2017).

However, because these women's language socialization practices are both raced and gendered, we adopt an intersectional feminist lens to examine their perspectives. In particular, we draw on the notion of *linguistic motherwork* (Ek, Sánchez, & Quijada Cerecer, 2013). Building on the concept of *motherwork*, which Black feminist Patricia Hill Collins introduced to highlight the gendered and raced dimensions of parenting (Collins, 1994), Ek, Sánchez, and Quijada Cerecer (2013) define linguistic motherwork as “the practices that Latina mothers engage in to maintain and develop their children's heritage language and literacy” (p. 202). The construct of linguistic motherwork allows us to examine these mothers' perspectives in ways that recognize and honor their intersectional experiences as women of color who contribute their labor towards the maintenance of the Zapotec language.

Of course, these women's language socialization work takes place within the complex transnational contexts of Indigenous diaspora. For this reason, we draw on Critical Latinx Indigeneities (Blackwell, Lopez, & Urrieta, 2017; Saldaña-Portillo, 2017) as a framework for making sense of their related perspectives. As Saldaña-Portillo (2017) described, Critical Latinx Indigeneities (CLI) is “a transnational commitment to understanding modes of Indigenous identification as shifting depending on the colonial particularities of their birth, and to the specific, contemporary conditions of the coloniality of power across the hemisphere” (p. 139). A CLI framework “examines mobility as a global Indigenous process of displacement” (Blackwell, 2017, p. 158) and it “considers the shifts in racial formations and the ways Indigenous peoples are racialized differently across and between different settler states” (p. 158). This lens helps us to account for these women's experiences across both Mexico and the

United States, and to consider how their transnational experiences are related to what they think and do with respect to maintaining Zapoteco in their children's lives.

How We Came to This Work

Before describing the methods that we employed, we wish to briefly describe how we came to this work, by which we mean both *what* motivated this particular line of inquiry and *who* we were (i.e., how we were positioned) in relation to the women on whom we focus in this article. In 2010, Ramón began a longitudinal qualitative study of language and ideology among multilingual children at a dual language school in Los Angeles, California. Two of the focal students from this larger study, Alma and Samantha, are of Zapotec ancestry, and Ramón has pursued lines of analysis focused on these multilingual girls' knowledge of Zapoteco since they were in Kindergarten and first grade respectively (Martínez, 2017, 2018). While interviewing Alma and Samantha on the playground one day, Ramón asked them if they knew any adults in their community (other than their parents) who spoke Zapoteco. When Samantha said that she did, Ramón asked to whom she was referring. In response, Samantha pointed to a woman who happened to be walking across the playground at precisely that moment, and said, "Ella" ("Her"). The woman in question was Olivia, a Zapotec migrant and mother of children at the school. Through the school's principal, Ramón subsequently met Olivia and three other Zapoteca mothers, with whom he began informal conversations about speaking and maintaining Zapoteco as a heritage language. All four of these women eventually agreed to participate in the interviews that constitute the focus of this article. Below we briefly describe our own respective positionalities in relation to these Indigenous Mexican mothers.

Ramón

I (Ramón) am not of Zapotec ancestry. I self-identify as Chicano, and I have Mexican, Hawai'ian, and Shasta Indian ancestry on my father's side, and Czech, German, and English ancestry on my mother's side. Like my White mother, I have light skin and I am often read as White by people who do not know me. Because my skin color typically trumps other phenotypic features, and because I was raised by a White mother, I have benefited from Whiteness and White privilege in various ways my entire life. While I have come to understand this differently as I have grown older and studied related theory and research, this is something that I have known experientially since I was a child. My father (like my late grandparents and other family members) has dark skin, and he has experienced various forms of racism

throughout his life precisely because he is racialized as brown. Growing up hearing about and witnessing his experiences, I became acutely aware of how my own embodied position and related experiences differed from his. In countless ways, my racialized subjectivity has influenced how I understand and experience the world, and this fact has directly informed how I approach and conduct my research, including how I make sense of the experiences of those who are positioned differently.

As important as naming my Whiteness and White privilege is naming my loss of indigeneity. As Blackwell (2017) notes, many Latinx scholars and activists who work on Indigenous issues “fail to name the powerful loss of their indigeneity” (p. 178). Although I have Indigenous Mexican, Hawai’ian, and Shasta ancestry, I was not raised with a deep connection to any of these Indigenous communities. While I was raised to be proud of my Indigenous heritage, and while this pride has directly informed my interest in the experiences of Indigenous Latinx students and families, I wish to explicitly name the loss of indigeneity that has been part of my own family’s experience over the past three generations; to situate that loss of indigeneity within broader contexts of coloniality and longer settler colonial histories of dispossession, genocide, and other forms of anti-Indigenous violence; and to clearly distinguish between my own positionality and the positionalities of those whose racialized and/or cultural experiences with indigeneity directly impact their everyday lives. In particular, I wish to emphasize that I am an outsider to this particular diasporic Zapotec community.

Finally, although being a father has positioned me to make sense of these mother’s perspectives in particular ways, I am a heterosexual, cisgender male, and my gendered experiences necessarily preclude understanding these women’s experiences from their perspectives. Although these women have welcomed me and invited me to learn more about them and their experiences, I wish to clearly articulate my status as an outsider (along these and various other intersecting dimensions). My awareness of this outsider status has directly informed how I engaged with these women before, during, and after these interviews, as well as how I have sought to make sense of the interview data. Because these women have confided in me and entrusted me with their stories, I feel a profound sense of obligation and accountability in sharing what I have learned from them.

Melissa

I (Melissa) joined the research team in 2016 as a research assistant after I learned about Ramón's longitudinal qualitative study of language and ideology among multilingual children. This study was my first introduction at my graduate institution to a project that included Indigenous Mexican language use and socialization practices. As a first-year graduate student at the time, I was excited and motivated to learn from a faculty member's collaboration with an Indigenous Latinx community in Los Angeles.

I contributed to the analysis of the video data he collected during the interviews with the Zapoteca mothers. As an Indigenous, Oaxacan woman of Zapotec descent from the pueblo of Santiago Zochila, I am a partial insider of the Zapotec Oaxacan community. My insider perspective allowed me to share background information on how Indigenous people create community and sense of belonging once they migrate to the U.S., the language socialization practices families use to teach their children about their native language(s), and the key role women play in Indigenous communities. Yet, it is important to note that my role as a researcher situates me as an outsider to the community. As a result, I am aware of my simultaneous identities and positionalities as I engage in critical scholarship that relates to Indigenous communities.

Reflections on Our Methods

This paper focuses on data from semi-structured interviews with four mothers of Zapotec ancestry whose children attend the public school where the larger study took place. All four participants immigrated to the United States from southern Mexico. Three—Elena, Olivia, and Zenaida—are from the North Sierra region of the state of Oaxaca, while one—Yadira—is from a Zapotec community in the neighboring state of Veracruz. Ramón conducted a total of two interviews—one with Elena and Yadira, and one with Olivia and Zenaida. During these interviews, Ramón asked the women specific questions about their attitudes, beliefs, and feelings about the maintenance of Zapoteco in their children's lives. Related to the sense of obligation and accountability mentioned above, Ramón sought to establish a certain level of reciprocity during each of the interviews, often sharing relevant information about his own family's background, his experiences with language, and his experiences as a father raising a bilingual child. As a result, the interviews often took a conversational tone.

Melissa subsequently transcribed the video-recorded interviews, keeping in mind the political dimensions of the transcription process (Bucholtz, 2000), including the representational

decisions involved in transcribing other people's speech, as well as the ways in which transcription itself is always already an analytic activity that relies on, reflects, and contributes to the researcher's ongoing theorizing (Ochs, 1979). We (Ramón and Melissa) both then worked together to analyze the interview transcripts. Across multiple coding cycles (Saldaña, 2009), we generated both "top-down" (i.e., a priori) codes and "bottom-up" (i.e., inductive) codes, repeatedly applying these codes to the interview transcripts, and then revising our emergent coding scheme through an iterative process of collaborative sense-making. We should note that we did not view coding as an exhaustive process, nor did we see it as a means for objectively ensuring analytic certainty. Instead, we used coding as a way to make evident our theoretical perspectives on the data (Smagorinsky, 2008). As we made explicit our respective theoretical stances and our experiential knowledge with respect to the content of the interviews, we engaged in ongoing analytic conversations to reflect on, interrogate, and revise our emergent sense-making in relation to relevant theory. A key component of this process involved the use of *analytic memos* (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). We generated multiple analytic memos throughout every stage of analysis. Among other things, we used these memos to document and synthesize emergent themes, generate and reflect on our emergent coding scheme, and make explicit connections to relevant conceptual frames. The findings and analysis that we articulate below emerged from this collaborative and iterative process of putting our empirical data in conversation with embodied and inscribed theory.

On Thinking About and Doing Linguistic Motherwork in Diaspora

Our analysis of the data suggests that these mothers' perspectives on Indigenous language maintenance get enacted in their language socialization practices. All four of these women said that it was important to maintain Zapoteco in their children's lives, and all four of them reported engaging very deliberately in doing so. Through various means, these women exposed their children to Zapoteco, and they communicated to them the value and importance of this heritage language. Below we provide examples that illustrate these findings.

The Importance of Maintaining Zapoteco

Elena, Olivia, Yadira, and Zenaida all said that it was important for them to maintain Zapoteco in their children's lives. In particular, they noted that the maintenance of Zapoteco was important (1) as part of their children's familial and/or cultural heritage, and (2) in order to

facilitate communication with their family and/or with the larger Zapotec community here and in Mexico.

Familial and cultural heritage. Whether or not they or their children spoke or understood Zapoteco, all four women said that they wanted their children to learn the language as part of their familial and cultural heritage. Just as Zenaida referred to Zapoteco as “mi idioma” (or “my language”) in the opening quote, Olivia and Elena also used “mi idioma” to refer to the language. This linguistic heritage is something that all four women reported wanting to pass along to their children. Olivia, for example, commented: “*Para mis hijos, es muy importante que ellos aprendan el zapoteco porque es el idioma con el que nosotros nacimos como sus padres.*” (For my children, it’s very important that they learn Zapotec because it’s the language that we, their parents, were born with.) She went on to say, “*Para mí, sí es muy importante, y es lo que siempre les enseño a mis hijos, que ellos no se olviden de dónde vienen sus padres y el idioma que ellos hablan.*” (“For me, it is very important, and that’s what I teach my children, so they don’t forget where their parents come from and the language they speak.”) For Olivia, as for the other three women, there seemed to be a very close connection between hometown and mother tongue, and the maintenance of Zapoteco seemed to be one way to connect her children to her place of origin.

The idea of a place-based linguistic and cultural heritage surfaced as a recurring theme across these interviews, as all four women seemed to articulate the interconnectedness of Zapoteco, place, and indigeneity. Rather than a pan-Indigenous sense of identity, these women tended to focus more specifically on *region* (e.g., the North Sierra of Oaxaca for Elena, Olivia, and Zenaida, and the mountains of eastern Veracruz for Yadira), and, even more specifically, on hometown (or *pueblo*). Indeed, the importance of hometown in relation to language and identity loomed large across all four interviews. These women articulated a sense of *collective* identity and experience that was focused on the Zapotec language and that was tied directly to their hometowns, and this sense of collective identity was sometimes reflected in their use of language during the interviews. For example, all four women used the deictic marker *nosotros* (we), the possessive pronoun *nuestro* (our), and the related morphological verb endings *-amos*, *-emos*, and *-imos* (to conjugate verbs in the first-person plural) when talking about themselves in relation to Zapoteco. While the women sometimes employed these syntactic and morphological features to signal family relationships, they more often did so in ways that

seemed to index a connection to other Indigenous Zapoteco speakers in their respective hometowns. These cultural, linguistic, and place-based notions of collective indigeneity seemed to be central to the heritage that all four women wished to pass on to their children.

Communication with family and community. On a very practical level, but in ways that are directly tied to notions of familial and cultural heritage, all four women emphasized the importance of their children being able to communicate with Zapoteco speakers both here and in Mexico. In particular, wanting their kids to be able to communicate with grandparents back in their hometowns seemed to be an important motivation and rationale for teaching their kids Zapoteco. When asked why she wanted her children to learn Zapoteco, for example, Elena replied:

Más que todo por los abuelitos que tienen allá en el pueblo, como los míos. Hay algunos que no entienden, como mi bisabuela, no entiende el español. Entonces hablando con ellos es como no entenderle, ni ellos a ella, ni ella a ellos. Entonces eso sería bonito que ellos se expresaran, pero en el idioma que ellos hablan.

(More than anything else, because of their grandparents back in our hometown, like mine. Some of them, like my great-grandmother, she doesn't understand Spanish, so talking with them, it's like they don't understand one another. They don't understand her, and she doesn't understand them. So it would be nice if they could express themselves, but in the language that their grandparents speak.)

Here Elena emphasizes the importance of her children being able to communicate with her family back in her hometown in Oaxaca, something that is currently complicated by the fact that her grandparents speak only Zapoteco while her children speak mostly Spanish and English.

Zenaida described how her daughter used to be in a similar situation, but has since learned Zapoteco:

Yo, por mí, sí, yo quisiera que mi niña aprendiera así como yo. Es bonito porque ahí ella va a aprender muchos idiomas y se puede comunicar con la gente que no sabe hablar español. Entonces, en caso de mi niña, antes no hablaba zapoteco, pero ahora ya, como ya aprendió, y ahorita ya le habla a su abuelita, y como su abuelita no habla español, habla puro zapoteco.

(I, personally, would like for my daughter to learn [to speak Zapoteco] like me. It's nice because there she can learn lots of languages and she can communicate with people who don't know how to speak Spanish. Then, in my daughter's case, she didn't speak

Zapotec before, but now, since she already learned it, and since her grandma doesn't speak Spanish, she speaks to her only in Zapotec.)

In the quote above, Zenaida details how learning Zapoteco enabled her daughter to be able to communicate effectively with her grandmother, who speaks only Zapoteco.

Similarly, Olivia reported talking directly to her children about these kinds of communicative situations involving their family in Oaxaca:

Le digo cuando ellos vayan a visitar a los familiares de allá, ellos puedan entender y no se queden sin saber qué les están diciendo o qué...entonces, para mí, sí es muy importante que ellos aprendan.

(I tell them that when they go visit family from there, they'll be able to understand and they won't be caught without knowing what people are saying to them...so, for me, it is very important for them to learn.)

This kind of meta-pragmatic discourse—or talk about contextualized language use—is one way in which Olivia communicated to her children the importance of learning Zapoteco.

One thing that seemed clear for Olivia, as well as for the other women in this study, is that learning Zapoteco was not an all-or-nothing proposition. On the contrary, these women distinguished between *understanding* and *speaking* the language, and they framed both in positive terms with respect to communicating with family in Mexico. For example, Olivia shared an example of her son returning to their hometown in Oaxaca and relying on his emergent understanding of Zapoteco in order to communicate with his family there:

Por ejemplo, mi hijo fue hace un año, la primera vez que fue, a él le hablaban en zapoteco. Respondía en... aunque él contestaba en español, él sabía lo que le estaban diciendo.

(For example, my son went a year ago, the first time he went, they spoke to him in Zapotec. He responded in...even though he answered in Spanish, he knew what they were saying to him.)

In the above quote, Olivia emphasizes her son's receptive language skills, highlighting the way that his comprehension of Zapoteco facilitated communication even though he did not speak Zapoteco fluently. Indeed, Olivia seemed very proud of her son's ability to understand Zapoteco, adding: “Y ya, pues, allí ya no se...no se quedaba como diciendo, ‘¿Qué me dijo?’ No, él ya sabía lo que le decían y él contestaba.” (“And, well, he was no...no longer left as if saying, ‘What did they say to me?’ No, he already knew what they were saying to him, and he replied.”) Here

Olivia frames comprehension as an important dimension of overall communicative competence, which is the ability to communicate effectively in specific contexts (Hymes, 1972). Like the other three women, she underscored the importance of learning Zapoteco—whether this learning resulted in productive and/or receptive language skills—in order to be able to communicate with family.

In addition to emphasizing communication with family, these mothers also spoke about the importance of learning Zapoteco in order to communicate with other Zapotec speakers in their community. As Zenaida observed with respect to her children, “*Es importante que ellos aprendan y sepan comunicar con los demás que no saben español.*” (“It’s important that they learn and know how to communicate with others who don’t speak Spanish.”) Similarly, when describing her own children, Olivia noted:

Y es bueno que sepan...que si ellos llegan a ser alguien, por ejemplo, un abogado, y llega una persona que no habla ni español ni inglés, pero hablan en algún idioma, entonces ellos pueden entenderles.

(And it’s good for them to know...if they become somebody, for example, a lawyer, and someone shows up who doesn’t speak Spanish or English, but they speak in another language, then they’ll be able to understand them.)

Although only implicit in Olivia’s comment above, it seems that she is also pointing to one way in which learning Zapoteco could position her children to help others in their community.

To illustrate a related point, Elena shared the story of a friend whose U.S.-born children went back to live in Oaxaca for a few years, and then returned to the United States trilingual. She emphasized that these children could communicate with others in any of the three languages: “*Ellos se pueden defender y es lo que me gusta de ellos, y es lo que yo quiero para mis hijos, que aprendan eso. En cualquier lugar que vayan, ya están...ya saben los tres idiomas.*” (“They can defend themselves and that’s what I like about them, and that’s what I want for my children, that they learn that. Wherever they go, they already...they already know all three languages.”) Elena explicitly notes how learning Zapoteco enabled these children to “defend themselves,” and her admiration for these children’s trilingual competence seemed to directly inform her goals for her own children.

Finally, because Indigenous people and languages are systematically devalued and marginalized in both Mexico and the United States, proficiency in and knowledge of Indigenous

languages often gets devalued and/or rendered invisible (Martínez, 2017). For this reason, we wish to explicitly emphasize that these women's comments on the value of learning Zapoteco are, of course, also comments on the value of multilingualism. By framing Zapoteco as important for communicating with family and community, these mothers are also explicitly valorizing multilingualism in their children's lives.

The Deliberate Maintenance of Zapoteco

Elena, Olivia, Yadira, and Zenaida all reported deliberately maintaining Zapoteco in their children's lives. In other words, in addition to articulating the importance of maintaining Zapoteco, these women also actively engaged in the maintenance of Zapoteco by deliberately exposing their children to this Indigenous heritage language. While their active efforts towards exposing their children to Zapoteco primarily consisted of *speaking* Zapoteco on a regular basis (both in their children's presence and directly to their children), one of the mothers (Olivia) also reported *reading* to her children in Zapoteco.

Speaking Zapoteco on a regular basis. All four women reported being exposed to Zapoteco themselves as children, and they connected their respective childhood experiences with the language to their decisions to expose their own children to conversations in Zapoteco on a regular basis. Of the four women, Yadira was the only one who reported not speaking Zapoteco fluently. When asked if she spoke Zapoteco, Yadira replied, "*Sí, yo, este, entiendo el zapoteco, todo lo entiendo, pero para hablarlo, me cuesta trabajo hablarlo.*" ("Yes, I, um, understand Zapotec, I understand everything, but it's hard for me to speak it.") As Yadira went on to explain, her personal history of partial language attrition is rooted in the discrimination that she and her family experienced when they moved from their Zapotec hometown in rural Veracruz to Mexico City. Notice how she describes these discriminatory experiences in the following exchange:

Yadira: *Mis papás, cuando vivíamos en México, ellos, este, hablaban mucho, pero cuando nosotros, cuando nosotros le queríamos, le preguntábamos a mi mamá que cómo se hablaba o como qué significaba, mi papá se enojaba que nos hablara en zapoteco.*

(My parents, when we lived in Mexico City, they, um, they would speak [Zapotec] a lot, but when we, when we wanted, when we would ask my mom how to speak it or what something meant, my dad would get mad at her for speaking to us in Zapotec.)

Ramón: *¿A poco? ¿Por qué?*

(Really? Why?)

Yadira: *Porque en México hay más, este, discriminación.*

(Because in Mexico City there's more, um, discrimination.)

Ramón: *En contra de...*

(Against...)

Yadira: *De la gente que venimos de provincia. Allá sí, por ejemplo, nosotros hablamos otro idioma que no fuera el español, voltean a vernos como diciéndote, “Te perdiste aquí, tú no cabes aquí.” O si nos ven con huaraches o más de rancho. Entonces sí ya como que hay más discriminación en la Ciudad de México.*

(Against people like us who come from the countryside. There, for example, if we speak another language other than Spanish, they turn around and look at us as if to say, “You’re lost here, you don’t belong here.” Or if they see us wearing Indigenous sandals, or if they see that we’re from the countryside. So, yes, it’s like there’s more discrimination in Mexico City.)

Ramón: *Y en contra, específicamente, de la gente...*

(And, specifically, against people who are...)

Yadira: *De la gente indígena.*

(Against Indigenous people.)

As Yadira explains in the transcript above, her father went so far as to discourage her mother from speaking Zapoteco to Yadira and her siblings. While this is an understandable strategy for protecting his family from anti-Indigenous discrimination, Yadira suggests that it also, unfortunately, contributed to her current challenges speaking the language.

Despite not speaking Zapoteco fluently, however, Yadira articulated a commitment to exposing her own children to the language on a regular basis. One way that she reported doing this is by participating in conversations with her husband. She shared, for example, that her husband often speaks to her in Zapoteco in the presence of their children. While she said that she mostly speaks in Spanish during these conversations, she noted that her children are beginning to understand some of her husband’s Zapoteco words and phrases. In our view, Yadira’s active participation in these bilingual conversations with her husband not only communicates the value and importance of Zapoteco to her children, but also increases her children’s opportunities for exposure to the language. In addition, by eliciting and responding to

her husband's Zapoteco utterances, she likely provides subtle forms of scaffolding that support her children's comprehension and acquisition of the language. Finally, it is worth noting that Yadira and her husband chose to give their daughter a Zapotec name. This seems like a very powerful way of reclaiming indigeneity and communicating the importance of Zapoteco across generations.

The three other women in this study—Elena, Olivia, and Zenaida—all reported speaking Zapoteco on a daily basis. Like Yadira, they reported having regular conversations in Zapoteco with their husbands. In fact, Elena said that she and her husband communicate in “*puro zapoteco*” (i.e., exclusively in Zapoteco). Similarly, when asked if she spoke Zapoteco with her husband at home, Olivia replied: “*Sí, para nosotros, todo en la casa es zapoteco, todo.*” (“Yes, for us, everything at home is Zapotec, everything.”) It is important to note, however, that these women's conversations in Zapoteco also extend beyond the home. As Zenaida noted: “*Lo hablo en la casa y a veces lo hablo en la calle. Cuando me saludan en zapoteco, yo les contesto también en zapoteco.*” (“I speak it at home and sometimes I speak it when I'm out on the street. When people greet me in Zapotec, I also respond to them in Zapotec.”) Whether at home or in other settings, these mothers reported exposing their children to Zapoteco by speaking the language in front of them on a regular basis.

In addition to speaking Zapoteco in the presence of their children, Elena, Olivia, and Zenaida also reported speaking directly to their children in Zapoteco. Olivia, for example, shared that she speaks more Zapoteco with her children than she does Spanish, and she noted that her children understand her and respond physically to her verbal commands. Zenaida also reported speaking with her daughter in Zapoteco, and she said that her daughter understands and speaks the language. In her words, “*Sí, yo hablo con mi niña zapoteco, y ella lo entiende y lo habla bien.*” (“Yes, I speak Zapotec with my daughter, and she understands it and speaks it well.”) As these three women explained, their children have increasingly asked them questions about Zapoteco as they have grown older. In particular, they note that their children ask them how to say individual words and phrases in Zapoteco. Needless to say, these everyday moments of explicit language teaching also involve speaking directly to their children, and thus constitute additional exposure to the language.

Reading in Zapoteco. Although speaking Zapoteco on a regular basis was the primary way that these mothers reported exposing their children to the language, we would also like to

briefly highlight that Olivia reported *reading* in Zapoteco with her children. In fact, when she arrived for her interview with Ramón, Olivia brought—without any prompting on Ramón’s part—a copy of a book that her brother and father had co-authored with two other men. The book, which had parallel sections in Spanish and Zapoteco, focused on the history of their hometown back in Oaxaca, its founding, cultural traditions, and geography. Olivia seemed proud to share the book with Ramón, and she described how she used it to teach her children about her hometown:

Y mis hijos, allí cuando tengo tiempo, cuando ya terminamos todo lo que tenemos, entonces nos sentamos y me dicen, “Léeme un cuento, una historia.” Porque viene en español y en zapoteco. (And my children, whenever I have time, when we’re finished doing all that we have to do, then we sit down and they say, “Read me a tale, a story.” Because it’s written in Spanish and Zapotec.)

Of course, by reading this book aloud to her children, Olivia is not only teaching them about her hometown, but also providing them with additional exposure to the Zapotec language itself. Moreover, by providing them opportunities to engage with Zapoteco in its written form, she is exposing them to the sound-symbol relationships that will likely enhance their overall learning of the language. In our view, this is a powerful literacy event that contributes to the intergenerational maintenance of Zapoteco in Olivia’s family.

To reiterate, Elena, Olivia, Yadira, and Zenaida all articulated the importance of maintaining Zapoteco in their children’s lives, and all four of them reported deliberately maintaining Zapoteco by actively exposing their children to regular input in the language. In other words, these women reported thinking about and doing the work of Indigenous heritage language maintenance. Our analysis of the interviews suggests that what these women think about Zapoteco in their children’s lives directly informs what they do about Zapoteco in their children’s lives. In other words, they seem to be motivated to do certain things (e.g., speak Zapoteco to and/or in the presence of their children, explicitly teach it to them) because of their attitudes, beliefs, and feelings about the language. From a language ideological perspective, we can frame both their *thinking* and *doing* as ideologically mediated. What they think about Zapoteco, for example, is not simply a reflection of their individual attitudes and beliefs, but also a reflection of larger cultural, institutional, and social structures, processes, and discourses. And what they do about Zapoteco—in other words, socializing their children to speak

Zapoteco and socializing them through Zapoteco—can be understood as an enactment of their ideologies since language ideologies can be both *articulated* and *embodied* (Kroskrity, 2004). Below we draw on an intersectional feminist lens and a Critical Latinx Indigenities framework to theorize how these women’s ideologically mediated language socialization practices are gendered and raced across overlapping colonialities in Mexico and the United States.

Linguistic Motherwork Across Overlapping Racial Geographies

By thinking about and deliberately engaging in the maintenance of Zapoteco in their children’s lives, Elena, Olivia, Yadira, and Zenaida have created familial and cultural infrastructure to support the intergenerational transmission of Indigenous linguistic heritage. We argue that their efforts in this regard constitute “linguistic motherwork” (Ek, Sánchez, & Quijada Cerecer, 2013)—critical enactments of their language ideologies that serve important language socialization functions, and that contribute to the construction and maintenance of indigeneity within the context of diaspora. This work reflects the historically gendered division of cultural labor across both Mexico and the United States, while also highlighting the important role that women play in Indigenous communities.

It is important to emphasize that these women engaged in this everyday linguistic motherwork in the absence of the forms of institutional support, such as dual language education, that exist for sustaining Spanish in the United States. In addition, we should underscore that they engaged in this work within the larger context of overlapping patriarchies. As some scholars have noted, various everyday forms of structural violence are experienced in the spaces and bodies of Indigenous women (Zaragocin, 2019). To be sure, this connects to the issue of Indigenous heritage language maintenance in multiple ways. Blackwell (2017), for example, observed: “With the added layer of gender discrimination, Indigenous women often have little formal education and are more likely to be monolingual Indigenous-language speakers when they arrive to the United States” (p. 160). This is one way of making sense of Zenaida’s experience speaking only Zapoteco before immigrating to the United States, and then learning Spanish after arriving to Los Angeles. A CLI lens helps us resist simplistic interpretations of her experience. Rather than view her learning Spanish for the first time in Los Angeles as either disrupting U.S. imperial logics, or reflecting Spanish colonial logics, or connecting to patriarchal logics, we can understand it as being simultaneously related to all of the above.

Given that CLI frames Indigenous mobilities in relation to colonial histories and contemporary contexts of dispossession and displacement, and given that this framework focuses our attention on shifting racial formations across (settler) colonial contexts, we can understand these women's diasporic linguistic motherwork as contributing to larger histories of Indigenous resistance and resilience within and across the territories that now comprise the nation states of Mexico and the United States. Across both colonialities, their indigeneity is erased (albeit in different ways). As Bonfil Batalla (1987) argued, Indigenous Mexicans are a *civilización negada*—a denied or negated civilization. Through ongoing historical processes of erasure and related ideologies of *mestizaje*, Indigenous Mexicans are discursively relegated to the past and imagined to have been completely assimilated into the *mestizo* majority. When these Indigenous people migrate to the United States, they experience a similar (yet different) kind of erasure related to the U.S. settler colonial narrative of Indigenous extinction (Saldaña-Portillo, 2017). According to the colonial logic of *terra nullius*, U.S. Northern Tribal peoples (including the Tongva people, who are Indigenous to the part of Los Angeles where these Zapoteca mothers arrived) are imagined to be extinct—indeed, as Saldaña-Portillo notes, they are narrated into extinction. This narration of Indigenous extinction facilitates and perpetuates the discursive framing of the United States as a “nation of immigrants.” This, in turn, makes it possible to frame Indigenous Latinx migrants (including the Zapoteca mothers from this study) as simply another group of immigrants.

Ironically, of course, for many Indigenous Latinx migrants, their historical and contemporary marginalization as Indigenous people in Mexico and Central America is largely what has driven them to migrate to the U.S. settler colonial context. Once arrived in the United States, however, they are positioned as foreigners—racialized as “brown” Latinx immigrants, but not as “red” Indigenous people (Saldaña-Portillo, 2017). The settler colonial racial logic of the United States effectively strips them of their indigeneity and encourages their assimilation into the existing U.S. racial order. As Blackwell (2017) argued, this same logic has historically informed the racialization of the southwest since the United States seized the territory from northern Mexico. Commenting on the period immediately following the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, Blackwell noted: “Ironically, Mexicanization was also a survival strategy for many Native peoples under the newly imposed, and violently enforced, settler colonial racial regime” (2017, p. 159). The peoples Indigenous to California, such as the Tongva,

often deliberately blended into the Mexican population in order to escape White American violence in the newly seized territories. For the mothers in this study, some degree of Mexicanization is also arguably an option. The dominant racial logic in the United States allows for and encourages their assimilation and disappearance into a larger racialized Latinx category.

However, by virtue of continuing to speak and/or understand Zapoteco, and by passing this language down to their children, the women in this study disrupt the U.S. settler colonial project of narrating Indigenous extinction. And by arriving here in the United States as Indigenous people, they expose the official Mexican myth of Indigenous assimilation through *mestizaje*. They are living, breathing (and speaking) proof of 500 years of Indigenous *survance*—of *resilient indigeneity* (Casanova, this issue) in resistance to historical and contemporary projects of colonization, colonialism, and coloniality. By exposing their children to Zapoteco, and by speaking and/or understanding the language themselves, these women are embodying and enacting resilient indigeneity. Indeed, as Yadira's experiences illustrate, Spanish, despite being a colonial/colonizing language, can serve as a powerful vehicle for Indigenous *survance* (Morales, Saravia, & Pérez-Iribe, this issue). Moreover, as we mentioned above, maintenance of Zapoteco is not an all-or-nothing proposition for these women. On the contrary, they articulate a broad definition of what counts as speaking Zapoteco, and they frame *understanding* the language (even without speaking it) as both positive and possible—as a worthy and attainable goal for their children. In this way, these mothers reject notions of linguistic purity (Muehlmann, 2008) that, like related notions of cultural and genetic purity—or what Saldaña-Portillo (2017), following O'Brien (2010), refers to as the “colonial calculus of blood quantum”—serve to perpetuate the myth of Indigenous extinction and support the project of Indigenous dispossession and displacement. The notions of Indigeneity that these women construct and sustain, though emerging within (settler) colonial contexts, explicitly disrupt (settler) colonial racial logics.

Finally, a CLI lens helps us contextualize these mothers' emphasis on the importance of Zapoteco with respect to their familial, cultural, and hometown heritage. Recall, for example, that Olivia reported wanting her children to learn Zapoteco so that they could understand where their parents come from. Her linguistic motherwork in this regard (e.g., reading the Zapoteco book about her hometown) can be seen as a set of spatial practices related to larger geopolitical and historical processes and phenomena. As Blackwell (2017) notes: “Historical

dislocation makes Indigenous identity and language a matter of cultural survival, and many migrants aim to build translocal notions of Indigenous place that tie themselves and their children back to their pueblos of origin, its feast days, and civic responsibilities and cultural practices” (p. 160). These women’s efforts to make connections between their own hometowns and their children’s lives can be seen as forms of translocal place-making. Along with the various other examples of their linguistic motherwork described above, such practices constitute powerful contributions to the diasporic construction and maintenance of indigeneity.

Conclusion

In sharing their perspectives on the maintenance of Zapoteco in their children’s lives, Elena, Olivia, Yadira, and Zenaida revealed the complex and nuanced dimensions of their language ideologies and related language socialization practices. We argue that their everyday linguistic motherwork contributes to the construction and maintenance of indigeneity in diaspora, providing a powerful example of resilient indigeneity within the context of overlapping colonialities across the racial geographies of Mexico and the United States.

In our view, this study contributes to scholarly understandings of language socialization and linguistic ideologies among Indigenous Mexican families. By highlighting an under-studied population, this study also contributes to deeper and more robust understandings of multilingualism and multilingual families more generally. Indeed, scholarly understandings of multilingualism, multilingual families, and heritage language maintenance that do not include the perspectives of Indigenous Mexican migrants are necessarily partial and incomplete. In addition, our findings and analysis help to disrupt monolithic and essentialist understandings of both *Latinidad* and Indigeneity in education.

We suggest that this study has important educational implications related to recognizing and incorporating the knowledge and experiences of Indigenous Mexican families in public schools. To begin with, we wish to emphasize that Indigenous Mexican mothers are powerful models of bi/multilingualism for their children, that they can and should be recognized as such by schools, and that they can and should be important partners in culturally relevant/sustaining approaches to pedagogy. Given that these mothers’ perspectives help us disrupt essentialist and monolithic notions of Latinx culture, we suggest that they can also help us rethink approaches to culturally sustaining pedagogy that erase and exclude indigeneity. We also suggest that it is worth considering what role schools might play in supporting Indigenous heritage language

maintenance for children and families. For example, what if we provided institutional support for Indigenous Latinx languages in public schools? Following Morales (2016), we wonder what role dual language programs might play in this regard.

Of course, while we think these possibilities are worth considering, we also wish to urge caution in this regard. In our view, any efforts to support Indigenous language maintenance should proceed only with the leadership and full participation of Indigenous Latinx families and communities. Any support that schools might provide should begin not with the assumption that schools need to take the lead, but rather with a commitment to helping Indigenous Latinx families connect with the resources that already exist in their own communities, such as hometown associations, philharmonic bands, churches, and grassroots and non-profit organizations. To invoke a popular metaphor, we do not mean to suggest that schools cannot have a seat at the table, but rather that they should not sit at the head of the table. There are things that schools are not best positioned to do, and there are respectful and productive ways for schools to join the conversation and ask for a seat at the table. First and foremost, schools should recognize that there is already a table to join. In other words, schools should recognize and learn about the cultural knowledge, resources, and expertise that exist in Indigenous Latinx communities, including the kinds of familial and cultural infrastructure that the four mothers in this study actively constructed to support the intergenerational transmission and maintenance of Zapoteco. With this as a starting point, schools can follow the lead of Indigenous Latinx communities in ways that support Indigenous Latinx children and families.

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