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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Learning from Mexican Indigenous Women's Life Stories: Multilingualism and Sustainability

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Abstract

This paper presents results of a critical ethnographic case study whose main purpose was to document the lives, ontologies, and epistemologies of Indigenous women who have preserved their Indigenous language and are mothers of first-generation university graduates. Data collection consisted of multiple semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, and participant observations of linguistic and cultural practices of these women's Indigenous communities. Drawing on decolonial theories related to geopolitics of knowledge and coloniality of being, this paper presents the life stories of two Indigenous women, speakers of Mixtec and Zapotec respectively. Based on these women's life stories and multilingual and multi-semiotic practices, this paper analyzes co-constructed narratives which highlight their deep respect to mother earth, the hidden or disregarded Indigenous ways of being and knowing, and their connection to sustainability issues. Findings reveal that Indigenous languages and Indigenous life stories not only add to Mexico's multilingual richness but are also immense sources of ancestral knowledge that may be relevant to our current global challenges.

Keywords

Indigenous epistemologies; Indigenous ontologies; Mixtec women; sustainability and Indigenous languages; Zapotec women

INTRODUCTION

Mexico has historically been a culturally and linguistically diverse society. Despite the early 16th to 19th century Spanish colonial period and the lingering hegemony of coloniality, more than seven million Indigenous people, speakers of 364 languages, have resisted and survived (INEGI, 2022). Within this context, women have played a major role in keeping these languages alive, along with their ontologies and epistemologies (Dalton, 2010; De Korne, 2016; Stephen, 2005). Nevertheless, these ontologies and epistemologies have been demonized, in worst cases, while in best cases, simply ignored or regarded as old-wives' tales (López-Gopar et al., 2021). Compounding the problem, Christian beliefs brought by the Spaniards regarded Indigenous women not only as the new *Eves*, symbols of the original sin, but also as practitioners of witchcraft, due to their deep connection to the land (Ávalos Torres, 2021). Despite these pejorative and colonial views, Indigenous knowledge, which is preserved, re-constructed, and shared through Indigenous languages, remains vital to sustainable

development, with Indigenous women playing a key role in preserving and sharing their knowledge and connection to Mother Earth with other members of the community such as their children (Dalton, 2010; Stephen, 2005).

Since the late 1980s, it has been argued that Indigenous knowledge plays "a key role in the design of sustainable agricultural systems" (Warren & Cashman, 1988, p. 3). Research by Bebbington (1990) has recognized the local Indigenous agricultural and ecological knowledge, or farmer knowledge, present in the Andes area for thousands of years. Other Indigenous scholars have also focused on environmental perspectives by way of Indigenous epistemologies. Angayuqaq Oscar Kawagley (1995), an Alaskan (Yupiak) Indigenous scholar, documented the longstanding scientific and technological innovations of Alaskan native people, who have a deep understanding of and connection to the natural world. In Mexico, ecology researchers have also valued the Indigenous knowledge of Mexican peasants producing coffee and their contribution to sustainability (Morandín Ahuerma et al., 2023). Nevertheless, despite growing acknowledgment of the connection between Indigenous knowledge and sustainability, the "dismissal of indigenous knowledge and capabilities" (Warren & Cashman, 1988, p. 7) remains as a significant concern in postcolonial countries such as Mexico. For this reason, we deem it necessary to continue to shed light on Indigenous knowledge, especially from Indigenous women's perspectives.

Therefore, the goal of this paper is to present the findings of a research project through the lens of Mignolo's (2005) "paradigm-other," employing critical ethnography as its methodological approach (Anderson, 1989; Higgins & Coen, 2000; Jordan & Yeomans, 1995; Smith, 1999). The main purpose of this project was to document the life, ontologies, and epistemologies of two Indigenous women who have preserved their Indigenous language and whose daughters, Yesenia and Ana Edith, are first generation university graduates. Yesenia is the first author of this paper, and Ana Edith is the third author. Both Yesenia and Ana Edith, along with their two mothers, self-identify as women. Data collection consisted of multiple semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, and participant observations of linguistic and cultural practices of the two women's Indigenous communities, located in Oaxaca, Mexico.

Under the theoretical framework of decolonization, geopolitics of knowledge, and the coloniality of being (Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Mignolo, 2000, 2005; Quijano, 2007), this paper presents these two Indigenous women's life stories, including their multilingual and multi-semiotic practices as speakers of Mixtec, from San Juan Mixtepec Juxtlahuaca, and Zapotec, from San Miguel Albarradas, respectively. The paper analyzes these women's co-

constructed life episodes, highlighting their deep respect for Mother Earth as well as hidden or disregarded Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies, discussing their connection to sustainability issues.

Since we are deeply and personally connected to the two Indigenous women portrayed in this paper, our positionalities seem especially relevant. Yesenia, the first author of the paper, is the daughter of Francis, of Mixtec heritage. Among Francis's three children, Yesenia is the only university graduate and first-generation graduate student. She is a teacher educator in a BA language teaching program in Oaxaca, Mexico. She speaks Spanish, English, and some Italian, and she understands some Mixtec. Mario, the second author of this paper, is of mestizo heritage (on the paternal side) and African-Mexican heritage (on the maternal side). Mario is a first-generation university graduate. He is a teacher educator in the same BA program as Yesenia and Ana Edith (first and third authors). Mario speaks Spanish, English, French, and basic Japanese, and he has studied Zapotec from the Isthmus region of Oaxaca. He has known Yesenia and Ana Edith's mothers for several years and has visited their Indigenous communities for family and social events beyond this research. Ana Edith, the third author, is the daughter of Lupita, of Zapotec heritage. Ana Edith is also a first-generation university graduate. She is a teacher-educator in the same BA program as Yesenia and Mario, and while she speaks Spanish and English, she can understand some words in Zapotec.

Even though the three authors were not raised with an Indigenous language, we are all connected and respectful of Indigenous community practices. We are also especially aware of the pejorative views regarding Indigenous practices and their peoples. In this regard, this paper is both a research report and a tribute to our mothers and their Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies. As authors, our locus of enunciation is as Mexican children of Indigenous and African women, whose ways of being and knowing have been regarded as not worthy since the beginning of colonialism in Mexico. Consequently, understandably and purposefully, our interpretation and analysis of their stories will speak against colonial ideologies and present them as valid sources of knowledge as we attempt to portray them as brave and intelligent women.

Dwelling within this positionality, and to accomplish the goal of this paper depicting Francis's and Lupita's life stories, we first present the context, which focuses on the current situation of Indigenous languages, peoples, and women in Mexico. Next, the theoretical framework section highlights the importance of life stories, coloniality of being, and geopolitics of knowledge. Afterwards, we go over critical ethnography set within Mignolo's

(2005) "paradigm-other," followed by a section analyzing the life stories of Francis and Lupita. The paper then presents life episodes co-created with Francis and Lupita that cast light on these Indigenous women's ontologies and epistemologies, and their connection to multilingualism and sustainability. Finally, our conclusions are presented.

INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES, PEOPLES, AND WOMEN IN MEXICO

Indigenous peoples have been discriminated against since the Spanish invasion of Mexico. After 300 years of Spanish colonization, which took place from 1521 to 1821, there have been more than 200 years of coloniality, defined as the vestiges of colonialism that have persisted since the declaration of Mexican independence in 1821 (López-Gopar, 2016; López-Gopar et al., 2021; Mignolo, 2000). During the colonial period, Indigenous peoples were considered as barbarians or beasts, thus deemed in dire need of guidance from the Spaniards (Mignolo, 2000). These colonial processes are currently evident in the hierarchical positioning of Indigenous languages. As an example, we can cite how the variant of Mixtec, spoken by Francis and by her community of Yucumí (in San Juan Mixtepec, Oaxaca), has been given different names, revealing the different perspectives of the study of Indigenous languages and the colonial legacy in Mexico. According to Mexico's National Institute of Indigenous Languages (INALI, the Spanish-language acronym), the Mixtec variant is referred to as "sa'an ntavi," or central western Mixtec (2015). As stated by the Summer Institute of Linguistics (2024), "most speakers call it sa'an ntavi, meaning 'poor language,' while "[o]thers prefer to say sa'an savi, which means 'language of the rain'" (p. 1, quotation marks in original).

Likewise, the Indigenous Farm Workers Association (2025) claims that different speakers of this variant of Mixtec have pointed out that the words, "ntavi" and "da'vi" mean 'poor' and that they were used to distinguish their language from the Spanish language. In Mixtec, "the word for 'Spanish' is sa'a stchila, meaning 'rich language' (also: important, powerful, privileged language)" (p. 1, quotation marks and parentheses in original). This contrast with the Spanish language denomination reveals the colonial past and the present coloniality in Mexico and its impact not only on languages, but especially on the Indigenous people who resist these positions of inferiority or pejorative identities, as Francis has done (as shown later in this paper).

Lupita, the other research participant from the community of San Miguel Albarradas, Oaxaca, is a female speaker of Diixxzaj, a variety of the Zapotec language (Summer Institute of Linguistics, 2024). Diixxzaj is also known as "Dichsah" or "Zapoteco de Valles, del

Noreste" (Zapotec from Northeast Valley) (INALI, 2015). According to Ethnologue (2025), while this language is considered *stable* and not endangered, it is not used as a medium of instruction in the local elementary schools; instead, it has been replaced by Spanish. The Zapotecs from the Oaxacan Central Valley are "one of the most dynamic groups in the country," and "have shown a great capacity to reconstruct and reaffirm their identity based on their traditional practices and skills" (Coronel Ortiz, 2006, p. 5).

Currently in Mexico, Indigenous peoples suffer discrimination and face economic hardship. 23.2 million people in Mexico self-identify as Indigenous, equivalent to 19.4% of the country's total population (INEGI, 2022). Many of them live a migratory life, within their state of origin, other states in Mexico, as well as in the United States of America (López-Gopar, 2016). Under the colonial legacy, most of these people continue to face discrimination and exclusion in Mexico, having their human rights violated, particularly their right to education in their mother tongue (Hernández-Zamora, 2019). Most Indigenous people are invisibilized as "mestizos" (a term referring to Spanish-speaking individuals of mixed Indigenous and European heritage, the latter usually being all or partly Spaniard), or pejoratively referred to as "small-town peoples" or Indians (López-Gopar et al., 2021). According to Vásquez Parra and Campos-Rivas (2016), Mexico is the second country in the world with the highest poverty rates among Indigenous groups, resulting in low educational achievement. In fact, the academic achievement of the Indigenous population is much lower than that of the mestizo population by almost three years of schooling.

Indigenous women, especially, are at the receiving end of discriminatory practices, much more so than Indigenous men. Motta (2014), describes the challenges experienced by Indigenous women of color, highlighting how they are "subject to multiple oppressions, including political and epistemological invisibilization" (p. 22). The diverse and successive forms of historical discrimination against Indigenous women have been reported by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (2017), exposing the human rights violations to their civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights, particularly their right to access justice and, most importantly, to live free from violence. In this sense, Wright (2011) highlights the increased gendered violence experienced by women in Mexico, especially in the northern states. Likewise, Herrera and Duhaime (2014) state that, in Mexico, Indigenous women face triple discrimination: (i) because they are women; (ii) because they are Indigenous; and (iii) because they are poor.

Nonetheless, despite their limited access to the labor market, social programs, and health and education services, as well as their high rates of illiteracy and low political participation, Mexican Indigenous women are by no means passive recipients of social marginalization. They have resisted and articulated "a voice from the margins" (Motta, 2014, p. 22). Therefore, our locus of enunciation is in these margins, where Indigenous women such as Francis and Lupita have maintained their respective Indigenous language, along with Spanish, and have recreated their Indigenous epistemology and ontology. Francis and Lupita are in fact decolonizing agents, a theoretical construct that we discuss next.

LIFE STORIES, COLONIALITY OF BEING, AND GEOPOLITICS OF KNOWLEDGE

The life stories of Francis and Lupita are presented and analyzed through a decolonizing theoretical lens. Life stories are vital to talking back to colonial practices and contribute to theory building. Without life stories, as Smith (1999) warns us, Indigenous peoples run the risk of being portrayed as the colonial or exotic other:

> The significance of travelers' tales and adventurers' adventures is that they represented the Other to a general audience back in Europe which became fixed in the milieu of cultural ideas. Images of "cannibal" chief, the "red" Indian, the "witch" doctor, or the "tattooed and shrunken" head, and stories which told of savagery and primitivism, generated further interest, and therefore further opportunities, to represent the Other again. (p. 8, quotation marks in original)

Travelers' tales or stories have convincingly depicted "Indigenous peoples" as savages, unintelligent people in need of education, and (with regard to the female Indigenous population) as *witches* with diabolical medicinal practices (López-Gopar et al., 2023). In turn, it is through life stories that one may start to change these discriminatory perceptions and contribute to the development of decolonial theories as well. Indigenous women's stories could potentially shape practice and develop theories, which is the second use of theory as presented by Davies (2008):

> The first [role of theory] is the scientific use: This use requires a testable model which, … is falsifiable. Empirical observation and evidence are emphasised, the purpose being to generalise about natural phenomena so as to predict future behaviour of those phenomena. The second use of *theory* is the narrative sense in which a story is told. What narrative does is help us make sense of our world. Narrative … is "one of the most ubiquitous and powerful discourse forms in human communication."… It has had an impact on philosophy, literature, cultural studies, anthropology, and the social sciences (p. 297).

Indigenous women's life stories are immersed within modernity/coloniality discourses. After the Spaniard invasion, Europeans established the Atlantic commercial circuit, sending goods such as gold and silver from the Americas to Europe and bringing African slaves to America to work alongside enslaved Indigenous peoples in the gold and silver mines (Mignolo, 2000). Through the Atlantic commercial circuit as well as economic and political control, Europeans established what Quijano (2007) has referred to as coloniality of power. Within the coloniality of power, as Mignolo (2000) states, Indigenous peoples were positioned as the colonial other, in need of Spanish guidance to escape their lowliness and backwardness. Mignolo (2009) further argues that Indigenous peoples were "granted" the status of people under the influence of Francisco de Vitoria, a Dominican friar now deemed the father of international rights. Frequently, comments such as "Eres un Don Nadie!" ("You are a nobody!") and "Tienes que ir a la escuela para que seas alguien en la vida" ("You have to go to school so that you can be somebody in life") continue to be prevalent in Mexico. Particularly the second comment implies that we are "nobodies" and that only Western institutions such as schools can turn us into "somebody." In this sense, the coloniality of power originates the coloniality of being.

As part of decolonial theories, and building upon Mignolo's (2000) work, Maldonado-Torres introduced the concept of coloniality of being, highlighting how the coloniality of power shapes the life stories of Indigenous peoples in general, including the two women portrayed in this paper. According to Maldonado-Torres (2007):

> The concept of coloniality of being was born in conversations about the implications of the coloniality of power in different areas of society. The idea was that colonial relations of power left profound marks not only in the areas of authority, sexuality, knowledge and the economy, but also on the general understanding of being as well. While the coloniality of power referred to the interrelation among modern forms of exploitation and domination (power) … the coloniality of being would make primary reference to the lived experience of colonization and its impact on language (p. 242, parentheses in original, our translation).

In Mexico today, the coloniality of being is connected to Indigenous languages and their positioning in the Mexican society, within the broader language hierarchy and Indigenous peoples' ontologies and epistemologies. The linguistic hierarchy positions European languages such as Spanish at the top, reinforcing its hegemonic status. In this sense, Spanish functions not only as the language of instruction in schools, but also as a mechanism highlighting the notion that Indigenous peoples should be deemed as nobodies who need guidance. In this sense, López Gopar et al. (2021) states:

> Indigenous children are educated through this language, and their low levels of Spanish alphabetic literacy and high dropout rates is usually connected to their "being" Indigenous rather than to the failing school system operating in Spanish, which does neither meet their needs nor value or build upon their Indigenous language and literacy practices. (p. 315)

As thus argued by these authors, the coloniality of being puts the blame and shame on children and their families as well, especially mothers who are historically and culturally in charge of children's education. Up to this date, being Indigenous and/or identifying as Indigenous is synonymous with inferiority. This is corroborated by Rockwell (2004), who states that "in Indigenous communities, school practices communicate to students a negative image about their community, heritage, families and languages" (p. 4, our translation). Similarly, Mario Molina Cruz (2000), a late-Indigenous educator speaker of Zapotec, powerfully describes the impact of colonization, as carried out through the alphabet and schools, on Indigenous people's ontologies and/or being:

> The alphabet and school turned out to be instruments of cultural perpetuation, the stigma of illiteracy hurt our parents and grandparents when, because of not knowing how to read and write or how to speak Spanish, they were considered ignorant, people without culture, and even worse, in our Indigenous mother tongue they were called "bene tont", a term only used for the inept.. . . "Bene" means person or man and "tont" means fool, a word we borrowed from Spanish [the word in Spanish is "tonto"]. (p. 405, our translation)

As evident here, the coloniality of being is not only connected to Indigenous peoples' languages and ontologies, but also to the broader concept of knowledge as well as the ones who are considered to have such knowledge. This idea has been conceived as "geopolitics of knowledge". In this regard, Mignolo (2005, 2009) has argued that knowledge is not only produced in European centers through European languages. López-Gopar (2007) has also argued that knowledge should not be connected only to alphabetic literacy, as previously put forth by Molina Cruz (2000). Building upon Latin American sociologist Anibal Quijano, Germana (2010) argues that White European's knowledge or ways of knowing were imposed as superior *vis-á-vis* the ways of knowing of Indigenous, black, and mestizo peoples in the Americas.

Nevertheless, the concept of geopolitics of knowledge recognizes that knowledge is also produced in Yucumí and San Miguel Albarradas, Francis and Lupita's hometowns, respectively. According to Mignolo (2009), "geopolitics of knowledge and of knowing was one of the answers *from* the third world *to* the first world. What the geopolitics of knowledge unveiled was *the epistemic privilege of the first world*" (p. 20, italics in original, our

translation). Mignolo (2005) further argues that the "geopolitics of knowledge derives from *local experiences* (as science derives from local experiences of Western capitalist countries)" (p. 122, parentheses in original, italics added, our translation). In line with Mignolo (2005, 2009), we take seriously the life stories of Francis and Lupita, and we consider their knowledge and ways of knowing as legitimate and as valid as knowledge produced anywhere else in the world, and in any other language. Valuing these life stories, ontologies, and epistemologies requires a paradigm that sees beyond the paradigms conceived in Western centers as well as a research methodology that questions and challenges the status quo. We thus rely on a paradigm-other and critical ethnography, which we discuss next.

METHODOLOGY: CRITICAL ETHNOGRAPHY WITHIN A PARADIGM-OTHER

Documenting the life stories of Indigenous women and their epistemologies requires a paradigm which narrowly can be considered as an ideological referent (Wahyuni, 2012) or more broadly, the particular ideology set within a framework or general way of envisioning the world (Sughrua, 2020). To unpack this broader take on "paradigm," we utilize Sughrua's (2020) definition of ideology, "a system of ideas, attitudes, standpoints, conceptions and beliefs which arise in relation to material activity … or lived experience" (pp. 54-55).

We define the ideology of "coloniality" as the belief that a postcolonial populace remains subject to the discriminatory effects of its previous colonial legacy, with that legacy constituting the lived or historical circumstance underlying and solidifying this belief system. On the other hand, the ideology of "decoloniality" refers to the belief that "coloniality" can be overcome and eradicated, with the current lived experience of taking action to resist latter-day colonialism giving rise to and reinforcing this liberatory belief system. When an ideology such decoloniality is set within a so-called "world vision," one arrives at a paradigm (Sughrua, 2016, 2020). In this sense, Sughrua (2020) states that a decolonial paradigm or world vision–or any such paradigm or world vision–would consist of:

> an array of perspectives corresponding to what can be considered certain existential questions, each question in its own dimension, one dimension building on and interlocking with the other. Hence, both separate and superimposed, these dimensions are the following: (1) *ontology* (i.e., What is reality?), (2) *epistemology* (i.e., What can be considered knowledge of this reality?), (3) *methodology of epistemology* (i.e., How can this knowledge of this reality be obtained?), and (4) *ethics of practice* (i.e., What are the communally agreed-on procedures to follow in obtaining this knowledge of this reality?) (p. 51, italics and parentheses in original)

In alignment with this definition, and under our decolonial political stance, we promote the ideology of the "paradigm-other" (Mignolo, 2005), which holds that the marginalized, ignored, and once-colonized societies have true value and importance and can be held as pertinent for the present time and future. This is the "reality" or otherwise "apparent truth/certainty" that is included Sughrua's (2020) definition of dimension number 1. Heeding such ontological "reality," we feel that we are able to uncover not only the need to promote and attest to the felt-existence of this reality but also to uncover epistemological insights (e.g., as to types of knowledge and profiles of the knower) related to these societies (Sughrua's [2020] dimension number 2).

Once committed to this ontological and epistemological stance, we transition from the "paradigm-other" as ideology to the "paradigm-other" as paradigm. According to Mignolo (2005), the "paradigm-other" relates "to the paradigmatic changes of Kuhn and the epistemic ruptures of Foucault, a paradigmatic change and a special epistemic rupture" (p. 128, our translation). As such, the paradigm-other distinguishes itself from what have been largely considered Westernized and Eurocentric paradigms such as positivism, post-positivism, and structuralism (Cannella & Lincoln, 2020). In co-constructing life stories (i.e., the "method" or "data collection" dimension of our "methodology" for obtaining knowledge; Sughrua's [2020] dimension number 3), a paradigm-other is essential.

Such paradigm-other stems from "the colonial spaces that the auto-narrative and auto-portrayal of the modernist thinkers, who conceived modernity and concealed themselves in it, have negated as possibilities of thinking" (Mignolo, 2005, p. 128, our translation). Indeed, "a 'paradigm-other' pursues epistemic decolonization, but no longer from within modernity … [but] instead from its exterior" where "epistemic decolonization . . . requires borderland epistemologies" as well as "the openness towards de-(or pluri)versality [i.e, the ethics of practice, Sughrua's (2020) dimension number 4] (Mignolo, 2005, p. 128, quotations in original, our translation). In other words, a paradigm-other can be infused with Indigenous women's life stories, ontologies and epistemologies (i.e., Sughrua's (2020) dimensions 1 through 4, intersected and all overlapped), as in the case of the present study.

Adopting a paradigm-other in this study requires designing a critical-qualitative research project (i.e., the "research methodological" dimension of the "methodology" of acquiring knowledge; Sughrua's [2020] dimension number 3), in which life stories are revealed, and where these stories or accounts allow for the analysis of ontologies, epistemologies and their connection to sustainability (i.e., Sughrua's (2020) dimensions 1 through 4, intersected and all

overlapped). To this end and as part of qualitative research, the present study uses critical ethnography for data collection as well as analysis. It is through critical ethnography that the researcher engages in social justice by creating spaces for participants' stories to be heard and their Indigenous knowledge appreciated (Anderson, 1989; Higgins & Coen, 2000; Jordan & Yeomans, 1995; Smith, 1999).

It is from within the at once stable and shifting landscape of the "paradigm-other," and through critical ethnography that we engaged in conversation with Francis and Lupita, the two Indigenous women portrayed in this article. Working from borderland thinking, while acknowledging that a paradigm-other does not reject other ways of knowing but rather engages in conversation with them (Mignolo, 2005), we used "retrospective life stories" to collect our data, whereby the participants reconstructed past events according to their present-day feelings and interpretations (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1989). This reconstruction occurred through a series of dialogue or conversations with Francis and Lupita[1], who are Mixtec and Zapotec, respectively, and who are the mothers of Yesenia and Ana Edith. For this paper, we chose to utilize the women's real names, Lupita being the participant's nickname.

The conversations with the two Indigenous women took place in Spanish, and data collection took place over a period of one year. Collection of data included photographs and other artifacts brought by the participants, and conversations covered themes such as language practices, Indigenous community practices, family, school trajectory, critical moments, and any other topic in which the participants wished to discuss.

Among the guiding questions or prompts were: "Please tell me about learning or using Mixtec or Zapotec when you were growing up"; "Please tell me about your hometown traditions when you plant corn or other things"; "What are some things that you or other people in your hometown do to show respect to the land?" These conversations were audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis. Based on the analysis of the conversations and our "paradigm-other" filter, we now present two short life stories of Francis, a speaker of Mixtec, and Lupita, a speaker of Zapotec.

[1] We, the coauthors of this paper, have translated all the direct quotes from the life stories of Francis and Lupita from their original form in Spanish to English. Due to space constraints, we only present the quotes in their translated form of English.

LIFE STORIES OF TWO INDIGENOUS WOMEN

Francis

Francis is a native speaker of Mixtec, one of the sixteen Indigenous languages of Oaxaca, Mexico. She comes from a big family, being the eldest of thirteen siblings. She is the mother of two sons and one daughter, Yesenia, the first coauthor of this paper. Francis is from a small town called Yucumí, part of the San Juan Mixtepec municipality, in Oaxaca, Mexico. She lived her childhood there, and then she moved to another community to attend junior high school.

While Francis considers herself as a brave and hard-working person, she mainly identifies herself as an Indigenous woman. Francis was a monolingual speaker until she started elementary school. “I only spoke Mixtec before enrolling in Elementary school.” Then, she learned Spanish in elementary school and maintained her Mixtec, becoming bilingual. Her mother was a monolingual speaker of Mixtec, and her father spoke Mixtec and Spanish.

Francis decided to continue her studies in a small city called Tlaxiaco, Oaxaca, which is an hour and a half away from her hometown. At the beginning, she had to live with one of her sisters there, and to have some income to attend middle school, she made and sold tortillas. At that time, Francis faced different situations of discrimination. She explains, “When I arrived in Tlaxiaco, I still spoke more Mixtec than Spanish. It was difficult to pronounce some words in Spanish.” When she wanted to communicate with people from the city, they sometimes laughed at her because of her pronunciation in Spanish. She understood Spanish, but it was difficult for her to speak the language. That experience made her reflect on her future. Because Francis wanted to become a teacher, she enrolled in the Normal School for Indigenous teachers after completing middle school. After that, she started teaching in some rural schools, where people spoke other varieties of Mixtec.

Francis believes that her traditions and customs are the basis of her identity: “I like the customs and traditions of my hometown.” She also believes that the relationships that she has established with people from her community have positioned her both as an Indigenous woman and as a teacher. Francis is now retired and she has made a strong connection with nature. She sows and harvests corn in her hometown. This connection reminds her of the respect she and her community have for the land.

Lupita

Lupita was born on September 1st, 1966, in San Miguel Albarradas, Oaxaca. She speaks two languages: Zapotec as her mother tongue and Spanish as her additional language. Lupita grew up in a community where only Zapotec was spoken, and for seven years, that was the only language she spoke. She explains, "When my grandmother enrolled me in elementary school, the classes were only in Spanish, and there, I started to learn Spanish. The truth is that I did not understand Spanish very much, and it was difficult to talk to teachers and other children." Lupita learned to work the land and "sembrar con el pie" (sow with her foot) from the age of 10. She liked to sow furrows using a hoe. She says that the largest piece of land she ever planted measured three hectares.

When Lupita was about to attend fifth grade, her father took her to a boarding school in Reyes Etla, in the central valley of Oaxaca, but she was not accepted into the boarding school. Since her father knew a married couple who were teachers in that community, he decided to leave Lupita with them, so she could finish elementary school there. During that year, Lupita experienced fear because everything was spoken in Spanish and there were words she did not understand, which caused the teachers' children to make fun of her because she did not pronounce words well: "Most children spoke Spanish only. They used to make fun of me. I felt bad, but there were some difficult words to pronounce."

When Lupita turned thirteen, she began to study at the technical high school in Ixtlán de Juárez, in the Sierra Norte of Oaxaca, a bit closer to her hometown. There, her hobbies were reading books and solving mathematical problems. Once she finished high school, she wanted to continue studying at Escuela Normal Rural, a boarding school in Tamazulapan del Progreso in the Sierra Norte of Oaxaca, to become a teacher; however, she was unable to do so due to an administrative problem with her birth certificate. Therefore, that year she worked cleaning houses in the city of Oaxaca. Then, she returned to her community in San Miguel Albarradas, Oaxaca, where she worked with her uncle. Two years later, she married Honorio and had three children: one boy and two girls, one of whom is Ana Edith, the third author of this paper.

Currently, Lupita works in Oaxaca city, repairing backpacks, bags, and leather goods, an occupation that her husband taught her. She is proud to be an independent woman and to see her children grow up and pursue their dreams. After so many years, she considers herself bilingual, able to think in both Zapotec and Spanish. She believes that if she decides to study another language, she will learn it, "I would like to learn another language. I think I can do it."

Lupita often visits her hometown to teach her children about the traditions and cosmovision of San Miguel Albarradas.

Our Analysis

Both Francis and Lupita have dealt with the coloniality of being (Maldonado Alvarado, 2007) and geopolitics of knowledge (Mignolo, 2009). Even though their life stories are succinctly presented, these stories portray the strength and courage of two young girls who faced the obstacles posed by the colonial legacy of being formally educated in a language other than their own (i.e., Spanish). Francis and Lupita's Indigenous ways of being, ways of knowing, and languages were deemed not appropriate or worthy for schooling, which further challenged them. They both recount the stress they suffered at a young age due to not understanding Spanish. Most problematically, not speaking Spanish "correctly" or "mispronouncing" certain words in Spanish brought Francis and Lupita shame. This feeling of shame has been well documented since the 1980's in the life of children, speakers of Indigenous or minoritized languages, and members of Indigenous and/or minoritized ethnic and cultural groups (see personal accounts in Skutnabb-Kangas and Cummins, 1988).

In both cases, Francis and Lupita also left their families at a young age, not in the best conditions. Leaving their families behind and working while studying speaks to the participants' struggle, strength, flexibility and determination to move through a colonial school system that viewed their ontologies and epistemologies, and that of their parents and families, as inferior. However, despite this colonial positioning, they both became bilingual. Their bilingualism is a testament to their resistance since the subtle goal of Mexican schools was the erasure of Indigenous languages and *castellanización*, the process of the imposition of *Castellano* or the Spanish language. Both Francis and Lupita learned Spanish on their own terms while managing to maintain their Indigenous languages.

Interestingly, both participants wanted to become teachers, hoping to challenge the school system from which their discrimination and shame stemmed. While Francis was able to accomplish this goal, Lupita did not become an Indigenous teacher due to an administrative hurdle. Altogether, despite having their ontologies and epistemologies deemed as illegitimate, both participants kept their epistemologies, which are directly connected to Mother Earth and sustainability. Their Indigenous practices respect Mother Earth and view other creatures as equal, as described in the next section.

ONTOLOGICAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL LIFE EPISODES AND SUSTAINABILITY

In this section, we present four life episodes that were co-constructed with Francis and Lupita. We would like these life episodes (two co-constructed with Francis, and two with Lupita) to speak for themselves and invite the reader to challenge their potential Western worldview and/or compare and contrast these life episodes with other Indigenous communities in different parts of the world. We would also like the reader to reflect on the current state of sustainability that is affecting Mother Earth with worldwide effects and is experienced in different ways within particular contexts.

Francis and the Fallen Tree

In Yucumí, Francis's hometown, when people need firewood to make tortillas and to cook for their families, they go to their land to find trees, ones that are old and tall and especially those that have fallen. Francis shared a story about cutting down trees. She comments: "People must ask for permission to the *Madre Tierra* (Mother Earth) to cut down the trees." According to Francis, there is a ritual people should follow, otherwise the land and forest will not allow people to get wood. She said:

> People who participate in this should pray for their well-being because an accident could happen, mainly they should make the sign of the cross in order to ensure the work is done successfully and without obstacles, and so that the axe or machete does not break.

According to Francis, asking for permission to cut down the trees is a vital part of the ritual, and anyone who participates in the process of cutting down or cutting up trees needs to protect themselves. Francis mentions that it is crucial to provide an "*ofrenda a la Madre Tierra"* (an offering to Mother Earth). This is usually food that people participating in the activity are asked to share with the land and forest. Referring to the previous ritual, Francis said:

> One day, I was with my family, my sons, my grandsons, my grandchildren, and my husband. We went to the forest to cut up a tree which had already fallen down. My husband did not ask for permission and he started using a chainsaw to cut up the tree, but it did not work. He tried again, but he could not do it. I told my husband and sons about asking for permission and making an offering, but they dismissed me saying it was the saw that was dull. They went ahead and replaced the saw, but they could not do it.

Francis decided to make an *ofrenda* to the forest in order to have its permission and to keep her family safe as they were struggling too much with the chainsaw. She had to cook *a*

caldo de res (beef stew), and when it was ready, she first poured some beef broth onto the ground, saying the following in Mixtec:

> Yo'o na tyikaa yuña katsini ra xoo katsinora xoo na katsi takua kuaarii yeelu ni na kikvi na saa nyuun luu ra koo ni ñantoo.
>
> Mother Earth, give me permission to cut up the tree, please do not let anything happen to me, eat and drink this food that I brought to you. (Francis' translation)

Francis believes that this ritual is a crucial activity that her community should keep practicing, as it marks a connection between the forest and people. It is a way of communication, and referring to the land in Mixtec shows respect.

Francis and la Siembra (Sowing)

Planting is a common activity that takes place in Yucumí, Francis's hometown. This activity has a deep connection with nature. During sowing, two processes are followed: the first one refers to when the land is totally pure and unplanted with corn or any other grain. In this case, a prayer must be made to speak to Mother Earth and ask for permission, since the trees must be cut and the land must be cleared in order to plow the land and finally sow. When this happens, one person should say the following in Mixtec:

> Yo'o vatsi kuka'nu ini ni na satyuun kue lulu na ke'e ve'e luu ni ria kuu kanu inini na katya yuu ña ko'oni ña katsi ni ra kunani iyi koo tunto'o tan yu.
>
> Let me work in this part of your land. I am sharing with you this drink, a little for you so you can drink it. (Francis' translation)

The second process occurs when the land is already prepared for planting; the focus is only on planting corn. In this case, an offering is made accompanied by a prayer in Francis' native language, Mixtec. The offering consists of pouring onto the ground *mezcal*, *aguardiente* or *tepache* while asking for a good harvest. Francis mentions that in addition to the drinks that are offered to Mother Earth, they must also feed the land. Therefore, while they are working on the sowing, and it is time to eat, some food is dropped onto the earth before the workers begin to eat. Francis comments that her grandfather and older people often say the following in Mixtec:

> Ku Kanu ini i ra ki'i vitsi na kakiya aña ntunsi aña tatsavini ni ko'o ña kuñuu ini ra nakua xo'o katsi ni ra xo'o katsi.
>
> Allow me to sow in this area. This food that I am offering is not a big meal, but I brought you some beans. Eat them and thank you for letting us work here. (Francis' translation)

Francis says that when people sow, they always ask and give thanks for abundant harvests and for a good process of the work. This type of communication is crucial to show respect to Mother Earth.

Lupita and Hunting in San Miguel Albarradas

In San Miguel Albarradas, there are different rituals that people perform to show respect to Mother Earth. Lupita shares with us what men do in her community when they go hunting:

> Here, in San Miguel, hunting begins a day in advance, at night, when a group of hunters—older men experienced in the craft—gather in the village. Together, they assemble a bottle of mezcal, a candle, a pack of cigarettes, tortillas, and food. Once they make sure no one is missing, they head to the place we call *Daan Guieaa (Standing* Hill or Upright Hill), which is located at the entrance of the town.

According to Lupita, this hill is well-known in the village, and it is believed to be the dwelling place of the *Patrón* (The owner of the hill). Lupita continues,

> At the top of the hill, there is a clearing where the *pedimento* is located—a sacred place where the hunters speak with the *Patrón* and say in Zapotec: "Sidganenehen lúuju naahkal shlau vichiinaa´ dén guneel permis guguujtan shindool lachiguichechil naaja lash she gaazahkan." [I come to speak with you, you who own the deer, so you may grant me permission to kill your little one, and may you not be angry with me, and nothing bad happens to me. (Lupita's translation)]. This is a request for permission to take one of his "children," in this case, the deer they will hunt the following day.

According to Lupita, as part of this ritual, one hunter pours mezcal onto the ground while another man places a cigarette. Then they ask for the *Patrón's* blessing to grant them hunting permission and protection so everything goes well, and they would not have problems during the hunt. Once the offering is made and the protection requested, the hunters begin to eat, sharing their food with the *Owner of the Hill*, as it is believed he joins them in this gathering. After finishing their meal, they give thanks and return to the village. Lupita shares what happens next:

> The following night, the hunters gather again. Before entering the hill, they pour another cup of mezcal, reminding the *Patrón of the Hill* that they have arrived to begin the hunt. Once more, they ask that everything goes well, and that nothing bad happens to them, and for them to find a deer.

Based on Lupita's description, when men successfully hunt a deer, they thank the *Patrón* and pour another cup of mezcal, this time beside the slain animal, saying: "Naaja máscidnea shiregalaal deen quischteluuj mavanel tijbresch bedool naaja" [I have come to bring you a gift and thank you because you have given me one of your little ones" (Lupita's translation)]. Afterwards, they take the deer back to the village for their wives to prepare it. People make

sure that nothing is wasted, as it is believed that the *Owner of the Hill*, having given one of his "children," deserves respect. Thus, every part of the animal must be consumed without wasting.

Lupita and Talking to Plants

Lupita shares that in San Miguel Albarradas, people talk to and at times scold trees or plants. This is often done, but in particular during holy week. She shares what her mother used to do:

> When an avocado tree or any fruit tree does not want to bear fruit, on Holy Saturday, it is spoken to and told: "If you are not going to give anything for my children, I am going to cut you down." Then, a machete is taken and a light blow is given to the tree, without cutting it, just touching it.

According to Lupita, after performing this ritual, the tree begins to flower. In addition, Lupita mentions that in order to prevent the fruit from falling before their time, a cloth is wrapped around the trunk, which can be a t-shirt or a shirt. It is believed that this helps the fruit to grow and remain on the tree, since, many times, when the tree is already developed, a strong wind or some other factor can destroy the crop. Lupita states,

> The clothes are placed to protect the fruit; when they are put on, they say to the tree: "Palganaa dal quia'l gunel ni quial pol par dunujú par guidao na xiande gureje shin lujú" [If you don't want to give me this fruit, either to eat or to drink, I'm going to beat you, I'm going to knock you down (Lupita's translation)]. But, in reality, we do not knock it down.

In San Miguel Albarradas, an avocado tree, when it is planted, does not typically begin to bear fruit until after 10, 11 or even 12 years. The tree grows well because it is very cold in the village. According to Lupita, to plant it, the avocado pit is used. The soil is removed, watered, the pit is introduced into the hole, and in Zapotec it is said: "Gunnaa luuj vino loguichs liuj deen nisaal quial deen guneechil ni quialoojl guidaaguanna" [I will sow you in the ground so that you will grow and give us fruit to eat for everyone (Lupita's translation)]. When the tree reaches approximately 50 cm in height and has already germinated, it is transplanted to the place where it is to be cultivated. Before doing so, you ask for permission and talk to the tree once more to let him know about its new place.

Our Analysis

The four life episodes co-constructed with Francis and Lupita are windows that let us into their Indigenous ontologies, epistemologies, and languages and the resultant connection to sustainability. These life episodes are examples of the Indigenous knowledge systems, or epistemologies, that both Mixtec and Zapotec peoples, Francis and Lupita's respective ethnic/cultural groups, have developed for centuries and that have resisted colonialism and

coloniality. Their traditional ecological knowledge and farmer knowledge have led to maintaining a "different," more profound relationship with "other" beings: Mother Earth, mountains, trees, fruit, and animals, as evident in the four life episodes. In turn, this relationship has shaped their ontologies as well. Neither Francis nor Lupita considers themselves superior beings, a fact that challenges both Western and Christian ontologies.

In line with Francis and Lupita's perspectives, Meighan (2023) argues that peoples, language, land, culture, and worldview are an inseparable whole, and that Western societies have engaged in an epistemological error and human exceptionalism, believing that their modern epistemology is superior to others and that humans are the rulers of the world above other beings. To this end, Francis and Lupita demonstrate epistemology-other and ontology-other by showing respect, feeding Mother Earth, and asking for her permission. Most importantly, they speak to Mother Earth in their Indigenous languages.

For both Francis and Lupita, Mother Earth is alive and kicking. Mother Earth is an interlocutor with whom one can engage in conversation. Mother Earth is not just soil to be planted, not just forests to be cut, and not just mountains to be mined. Mother Earth -- much like the "paradigm-other" *paradigm* that guides this investigation, as described previously -- is also the "colonial other" that has been exploited and disregarded by Western ontologies and epistemologies. Nevertheless, Francis and Lupita are Mother Earth's allies, challenging colonial systems and engaging in decolonial practices.

CONCLUSION

Indigenous languages and Indigenous life stories not only add to Mexico's multilingual richness but also provide vast sources of ancestral knowledge which may be relevant for our current global challenges. By presenting the life stories of Francis and Lupita, and by recognizing their ancestral knowledge and their personal connection and communication with Mother Earth as valid, this article has intended to pursue epistemic decolonization (Mignolo, 2005) in the Yucumí and San Miguel Albarradas communities in Oaxaca, Mexico. In other words, these life stories, ontologies, and epistemologies are situated in the borderlands, from which these two women spoke back to Western conceptions of being and knowing.

Casting and perhaps echoing their voices back across the distances to the mainstream, both Francis and Lupita assert the value of telling by showing (Denzin, 2018), though it may be a *tension provocateur* in the face of the mainstream scientific hypotheses knowing. At the same time, though, Francis and Lupita seem to deflate this tension between the two types of

theorizing (i.e., the so-called narrative-based and science-based; Davies, 2008). Instead, their life stories suggest that narrative knowing is not in a struggle to replace scientific knowing, but rather in a campaign to reside along with theoretical knowing (2020) on the geopolitical level where previously colonized and hence silenced or hidden ways of being can be validated (Mignolo, 2000, 2005), erasing the line between the periphery and the mainstream.

Such practice results in parts of historical coloniality dialoging with modern-day postcoloniality (2000, 2005), as seemingly demonstrated by Francis who, as an apparent torch-bearer of postcoloniality, makes an offering to Mother Earth as a way of asking permission to cut down a tree, while her husband and son, as if well-intentioned hecklers on the coloniality side, stand beside her and good-naturedly joke about her efforts. The small tree, cut down and likely chopped into firewood by the family (Francis, husband, and son), who then carried it and headed home together, depicts the coexistence which at times takes place between coloniality and postcoloniality. While it can be seen as an inevitable yet unhealthy union, it works against the silencing effect of binary relationships such as coloniality versus postcoloniality (Denzin, 2018). This anti-binarism is but one example of Francis' and Lupita's ancestral knowledge.

We, as researchers and relatives of these two women, seek to validate and learn from this knowledge, and we regard Francis and Lupita as brave women, who have defended their Indigenous ontologies, epistemologies, and languages. We hope that we have done justice to both Francis and Lupita and that other people will learn from them as much as we have.

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