## Chapter 6 - Diasporic Indigenous Latinx Identity and Media

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Like other Indigenous communities around the world, Indigenous Latinx creators put to use diverse forms of media, including video and film, to create and disseminate their own cultural, historical, and political viewpoints that signal the growing place of Indigenous-led voices in twenty-first century media production. In this chapter, you will discover Indigenous Latinx media-makers and their practices, identify some key actors and general characteristics of Indigenous Latinx audiovisual practices, and interpret the ways Indigenous creators understand their **indigeneity**, particularly in a **diasporic** context. You will also consider the ways Indigenous Latinx media-makers challenge rigid and reductionist understandings of both **Latinidad** and indigeneity in their works. First, you will briefly review the cultural context of the diversity of Indigenous peoples in Latin America. Next, you will assess the problematic and stereotypical representations of Indigenous communities by dominant cinemas in both Latin America and the United States, contextualizing the challenges Indigenous creators must overcome in depicting their own communities. Finally, you will reflect on two critical case studies of the works of Indigenous Latinx filmmakers and explore strategies and practices of Indigenous self-representation in cinema.

### Indigenous Peoples in Latin America

Indigenous cultures and peoples do not belong to one identity supra-category, as there is great historical, cultural, and linguistic difference among Indigenous communities within Latin American regions. For example, in [Mexico](https://iwgia.org/en/mexico.html) there are around 70 Indigenous groups, and approximately 68 Indigenous languages (Sistema de Información Nacional, SIC). [Guatemala](https://iwgia.org/en/guatemala.html) is home to 24 ethnic groups and around 22 Indigenous languages, with descendant groups of the Mayans in the majority (IWGIA). When referring to Indigenous communities, the reality of multiple indigeneities and the specifics of history, language, and culture in shaping identity must always be considered.

What Latin American Indigenous groups all have in common, however, is a shared history of colonization that has continued to perpetuate systematic racism and marginalization in national contexts. Following the period of independence of European colonial authority (predominantly Spanish and Portuguese), the inclusion of Indigenous societies in emerging understandings of Latin American nationhood was seen as problematic. Indigenous communities presented a puzzle for the nation-building process, which searched for political, economic, and cultural unification. In order to forge a “unified” nation, countries chose to adopt an ideological state project of ***mestizaje***––the process of racial, ethnic, and cultural mixing. Through different periods, political and intellectual elites of Latin American and Caribbean states have promoted different versions of *mestizaje* as a model of nation. Underlying the concept of *mestizaje* has been the validation of a series of assimilationist policies that undermine and suppress unique Indigenous identities in favor of a national identity where the ***mestizo*** (mixed descent) person is the ideal citizen.

Indigenous peoples of Latin America are a growing population within the US Latinx community. An Indigenous Latinx diaspora has been precipitated by economic crises and political violence in places of origin. For instance, the number of Indigenous migrants (Mayan descent, Garifuna, Xinca) fleeing Guatemala has increased since the 1980s due to the systematic genocide perpetuated by dictatorships and civil war. When Indigenous Latinx people migrate to the United States, they must contend with the ethnic and racial conceptions of a new social context. For example, in the US, the category of Indigenous is marginalized along with many other ethnic groupings. Despite the growing number of Indigenous Latinx located within the United States, the population has remained less visible in American society as it is incorporated into more generalized identity categories such as Mexican, Guatemalan, Hispanic, and Latino. In reality, complex Indigenous cultural, historical, and linguistic backgrounds do not necessarily conform to such reductive identity categories. For example, the term “Hispanic” refers to a Spanish heritage of Latin America, while “Latino” alludes to the geographical origins of people from Latin America. Both of these identity categories are the most used in the US to classify people of diverse background or origin from Latin America. However, neither category fully acknowledges the wide variety of peoples of Indigenous and/or African descent that make up Latin America. Indigenous Latinx, therefore, is a more representative way to refer to the population since it better recognizes the complexities of ethnic identity and is also a gender-neutral term.

### Recurring Stereotypes of Indigenous Peoples in Film

The dominant cinemas in both Latin America and the United States historically developed stereotypical representations of Indigenous people. In North America, Indigenous characters have been depicted within a narrow range of tropes: savage, warrior, medicine man/woman, stoic Indian, or beautiful maiden. Further, Indigenous societies have been represented as vanishing cultures, unable or unwilling to adapt to modernity. Michelle H. Raheja explains that since the beginning of the North American film industry, there has been a persistent fascination with the image of the American Indian. Although Native Americans are hypervisible in films produced during the twentieth century, they are simultaneously “rendered invisible” through plotlines that “reinforce the trope of Indigenous people as vanishing or inconsequential” (2010, x). Such films influence non-Indigenous audiences, shaping their perceptions of indigeneity through stereotypes that ignore Indigenous societies in modern, holistic, and living contexts.

Indigenous Latinx communities have faced similar misrepresentations in the national cinemas of Latin American countries. In the case of Latin America, there have generally been few cinematic stories about Indigenous people. In Mexico, however, between the 1940s and 1950s, a series of films were produced with stories about Indigenous characters, yet the films showed an idealized version of a “whitened Indian.” The actors who portrayed Indigenous characters were always *mestizos* or white.

<Fig.6.1 here> *In* María Candelaría *(Emilio Fernández, 1943) non-Indigenous actors perform the main Indigenous characters.*

Even after these films became dated, several generations of audiences have remained exposed to the productions due to constant re-airings by Spanish language television networks in Mexico (Televisa, Azteca) and in the US (Univision, Azteca America, Telemundo), thereby perpetuating problematic cultural representations.

Indigenous Latinx communities that migrate to the United States must also deal with the broader stereotypes of Mexicans and other Latin American ethnicities by **mainstream** Hollywood cinema. The tropes used by Hollywood to represent Mexicans and Latin Americans in general include: *el bandido* (the bandit), the harlot, the male buffoon, the female clown, the dark lady, and the Latin lover (Berg 66-86). Such stereotypes can be traced back to the silent era of Hollywood cinema (1910-l920) and its consolidation during the Golden Age of Hollywood (1920-1960), where the Mexican bandit was a recurring character, mostly in western dramas. In more contemporary films, the figure of the immigrant (particularly undocumented ones) as well as the maid or housekeeper, have also emerged as common tropes. As Ramírez Berg further explains, in such film representations “Mexicans and Mexican Americans may be stereotypically believed to be lazy, dirty, dishonest, unmoral, and with low regard toward life. These traits are then applied to actual Mexicans encountered in lived experience” (39). In both North American and Latin American contexts, then, Indigenous populations have been strongly stereotyped on film. The cinematic misrepresentation of Indigenous peoples is due to many factors, including a dominant ideology of social and cultural assimilation, but also the fact that such audiovisual representations have been made by non-Indigenous people.

### Indigenous Self-Representation in Film

Among global Indigenous communities there is a growing movement of using audiovisual media to undo the negative effects of colonialism that have denied and excluded Indigenous realities, histories, stories, and knowledges (Mignolo; Smith). By creating their own content through processes of self-representation, Indigenous creators look to subvert dominate narratives that marginalize Indigenous lived experience and instead show the myriad of realities in which contemporary Indigenous communities are immersed.

In the case of diasporic Indigenous Latinx media creators, they also reveal and represent the complexity of what it means to be Indigenous within the migrant experience. In their works, they embark on social, political, and cultural quests to make visible aspects of Indigenous identity and culture, such as traditions, languages, belief systems, and knowledges, that render a more nuanced depiction of realities. In other words, diasporic Indigenous Latinx creators emphasize ethnic and cultural expressions to distinguish their specific communities from more general categories such as Guatemalan, Mexican, Hispanic, Latino, and/or immigrant. Further, many of these media-makers undertake a dialogue with such generalized identity categories within both the United States and communities of origin, questioning what it means to be Indigenous and holdother identity markers, such as those based on ability, age, class, gender, religion, and/or sexual orientation. Moreover, diasporic Indigenous Latinx media-makers show the way Indigenous migrants renegotiate and build **transnational identities** as a result of the process of understanding their relationship with their communities of origin and wider US society. In doing so, they show how this dialogue also shapes the way they assume their indigeneity and sense of identity in a diasporic context.

### Indigenous Latinx media-makers

In the Latinx media landscape, there has been an increase of filmmakers and media-creators that self-identify as Indigenous. For example, the database [Latinx Directors](https://www.latinxdirectors.com/home) shows twelve film directors in the Indigenous Latinx category, many who highlight their Indigenous background in their biographies. For instance, Cristina Kotz Cornejo’s biography mentions that she is a descendant of the Indigenous Huarpe people of the Cuyo region of Argentina; Peter Bratt’s biography emphasizes his Quechua heritage and the fact he was raised by a strong, Indigenous, single mother from Peru; and Yolanda Cruz describes herself as a Chatino who films in Oaxaca and the United States. The Latinx Directors database only provides a small glimpse of the panorama of Indigenous creators who are currently developing a body of work in the film industry. However, we must also take into account the existence of media creators in the form of collectives and collaborative groups focused on producing media by and for their communities, and that draw on local, translocal, or non-local stories.

It is important to note that if a filmmaker identifies as Indigenous Latinx it does not necessarily mean that their work always revolves around their identity or that their narrative themes are related to Latinness, indigeneity, or immigration. However, this chapter highlights filmmakers who, in addition to identifying as Indigenous Latinx, develop their work taking these characteristics into account. It is also relevant to understand that even when some filmmakers identify themselves as Indigenous Latinx, they must continuously negotiate identity labels. In an [interview by Moi Santos](https://www.sundance.org/blogs/perspectives-aurora-guerrero-and-yolanda-cruz-are-redefining-notions-of-latinidad-one-film-at-a-time/?fbclid=IwAR15LiYAGIfIWjP8NpQ4QHWbdN-rRcntpLNAYHenBJbWGjL81UabAkPbxqs) for Sundance Institute with Aurora Guerrero and Yolanda Cruz, both filmmakers explain what the term “Latinx” means to them. (Guerrero’s directorial debut was the acclaimed narrative film *Mosquita and Mari* (2012); Cruz has distinguished herself with documentaries related to immigration issues.) Questioned about whether they identify with Latinx or another term, Guerrero mentions that while she uses the term Latinx because it is genderless and inclusive, she also identifies as Xicana because it “puts the Indigenous over the European.” Cruz also mentions the inclusivity of Latinx, but nevertheless recognizes the importance of intersecting identities: “yes, I am identified as a Latinx; I am also Indigenous and Chatina.” It is clear that while identity may shift depending on a number of situational contexts, for these filmmakers it is important that their indigeneity be recognized as an aspect of their identity formation that in turn influences the content that they create.

Although each Indigenous Latinx filmmaker develops their own particular style, those with a more prominent ethnic consciousness may present certain characteristics in their films, such as a connection with their place of origin––an especially common practice among immigrant filmmakers. Hamid Naficy explains in his seminal work about the filmmaking practices of exiled, diasporic, or immigrant filmmakers, that such practices are distinguished by an ethnic consciousness and distinctiveness that the filmmaker maintains over time and that gives them a horizontal and **multi-sited** consciousness involving both homeland and compatriot communities elsewhere. For these reasons, we can find in their works a blend of topics or technics. For instance, some of the filmmakers integrate different linguistic codes in their films such as English, Spanish, and Indigenous languages, or even a mishmash of different languages, such as Spanglish. For others, in order to reveal their diverse geographical and life experiences, they will utilize a combination of fiction, documentary, and experimental forms. Still others choose to prominently integrate Indigenous knowledge and cultural expressions like ​​rituals, dances, songs, and storytelling into their works.

Diasporic Indigenous Latinx media-makers also depict what Lynn Stephen has conceptualized as the “transborder” experience, best characterized in the migration of Mexican Indigenous peoples to the United States. Stephen argues that Indigenous migrants not only cross a physical, national border but also a number of other metaphorical borders or frontiers (such as ethnic, gendered, generational, regional, or linguistic) that shape their experience and identity (24-25). Similar to other diasporic communities, Indigenous Latinx must build bridges between their communities of origin and their new communities in the United States. Diasporic Indigenous Latinx filmmakers, when seeking to connect with their communities of origin, use media as a way of extending cultural networks while telling current stories about their communities. Some of these filmmakers use their media practices to provide support to their communities or nation of origin, and seek to explore deeper political and cultural issues faced by their communities through actively engaging in forms of activism. Activism is gaining an increasingly central role and theme in the media practice of diasporic Indigenous Latinx filmmakers, addressing issues of dual citizenship and cultural rights, among other concerns. In addition, some of the Indigenous Latinx creators inquire about the historical, political, and cultural marginalization in which Indigenous peoples have been immersed since the period of colonization.

In the next section you will explore two case studies that illustrate how diasporic Indigenous Latinx creators shape their films to reflect perspectives and agendas that are informed by their indigeneity and their status as migrants. In the first case study, you will be introduced to the documentary works of the Chatino filmmaker Yolanda Cruz. In the second case study, you will learn about the Taraspanglish Migrant Video Project, a binational collaborative and community project that focuses on the Purépecha Indigenous migrant community. The Taraspanglish Migrant Video Project is an example of media production made by the community and for the community, both in their region of origin and in the United States.

### Yolanda Cruz

Yolanda Cruz reflects the transborder experience of Indigenous Latinx immigrants since her personal story shows the multiple frontiers of her journey as a Mexican and Chatino filmmaker. Cruz is originally from Cieneguilla, a small Chatino town in Oaxaca, Mexico. She moved first to the state capital, Oaxaca City, and later emigrated to the United States. Her training as a filmmaker was obtained through a master's degree in Directing from the School of Film and Television at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). When asked about her identity and the way in which she perceives herself, Cruz outlines the categories that she has incorporated into her sense of identity, which is both dynamic and situational. For example, as Cruz is Chatino she is considered Indigenous in Mexico, but when she moved to the US she became a Latina or Mexican. Although Cruz embraces all the labels that tell part of her personal journey, she considers herself more than anything an Indigenous and Chatino filmmaker (Chavez-García, 2011). In this sense, Cruz shows the fluidity of her Indigenous identity that incorporates other identity categories as her reality changes, deconstructing the notion of an Indigenous fixed identity.

Cruz’s documentaries conceptualize identity as based on acts of self-definition––an active and constant process of choice and positioning that is shaped by migration experiences. In particular, her documentaries *Guenati’zá / The Ones Who Come to Visit* (2004), and *Sueños binacionales / Bi-National Dreams* (2005), explore the diaspora of Indigenous peoples of Oaxaca and the formation of transnational networks. The 16-minute documentary *Guenati’zá / The Ones Who Come to Visit* narrates the return trip to Mexico of immigrant Ulises García and his family for the celebration of the Christmas holidays in his native town of Analco in Oaxaca. García is a Zapotec who works as a gardener in Los Angeles, California. In the documentary, Cruz shows glimpses of the interactions that migrants have with their community of origin when they temporarily return for local festivities, intertwining the voices of migrants, locals, young people, old people, women, and the filmmaker. The film reveals how identity is not always imposed by others, but can be actively created and shaped by migration experiences and the act of leaving and returning.

*Guenati'zá* begins with a close-up of the face of a man who says to the interviewer in Spanish: “Look, I'm *Oaxacaliforniano*, but I'm from Oaxaca.”

<Fig. 6.2 here> *Zapotec Ulises García describe himself as* Oxacaliforniano.

Then, a narration by Yolanda Cruz states “García is Zapotec, one of the largest Indigenous groups in Oaxaca, México. Ulises came to Los Angeles in 1982 when he was 18. He has been a gardener and a community organizer.” This commentary accompanies a sequence of medium-long shots and close-ups that depict Ulises in his activities as a gardener. Ulises establishes from the first moment his identity recreated by his migrant situation when he states that he sees himself as a *Oaxacalifornian*, integrating two spatial realities that in his opinion define him. The elements that shape Ulises’ identity are in this case dictated by the geography in which he moves, each location carrying a particular historical and symbolic load within their national contexts. More than 16 Indigenous groups inhabit the state of Oaxaca, each with a distinctive identity, language, and traditions. California, a former Mexican territory, is one of the states with the highest gross domestic product in the United States thanks to the diversification of economic activities in the areas of ​​agriculture, tourism, technology, and information technology. This makes the state an attractive point for migrants (both domestic and foreign) seeking to improve their living conditions. As Cruz mentions in her narration “Los Angeles has become a home away from home.” For Ulises, both regions give him a sense of identity, but it is his connection of origin that continues to occupy a primary place when he emphasizes “but I'm from Oaxaca.”

Another documentary by Cruz offers a closer look at the way in which two diasporic Indigenous groups from Oaxaca establish ties with their communities of origin. *Binational Dreams / Bi-National Dreams* is a 30 minute documentary that deals with the migration of Mixtecs and Chatinos to the United States. The structure of this documentary is divided into two parts. The first part narrates the experiences of the Mixtecs, who since the 1970s have moved to harvest the fields of California. During this time, they have been able to establish a network of communication, and political and economic organization with their community in Oaxaca through the creation of the *Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales* (Indigenous Front of Binational Organizations or FIOB). The second part of the documentary refers to the Chatino population, to which Cruz belongs. The Chatino community, unlike the Mixtecs, began to migrate to the United States in the 1990s and, therefore, do not have a solid organization to help both those who have emigrated and those who have remained in their place of origin. The documentary presents the more difficult context and future that this Chatino community must face due to the lack of social organization.

The element that Cruz focuses on in this documentary is the political and cultural activism carried out by the Mixtecs. This work is introduced when Rufino, one of the interviewees, explains that one of the first programs of the FIOB was a project that involved Indigenous peoples and California Rural Legal Assistance to guide and educate migrant workers about their labor rights under California law in their own languages such as Mixtec: “We speak a language that is not Spanish and it is not English. There are many organizations that defend human rights, migrant rights, but we are the only ones who speak the language”

<Fig. 6.3 here> *The Mixtec group gets organized in California*.

One of the most interesting parts in the film, and which gives its name to the documentary, is the idea of a hybrid ​​identity that Rufino outlines. Both he and his colleagues who live in the United States are proudly Mixtec: “We, the leaders, must be Indigenous, feel pride in being Indigenous. Understand that our culture must prevail, and feel that our identity is all we have in the world.” However, he points out that they are conceived as binational by living and working in the United States. In fact, the organization to which they belong highlights binationality in its name. Thus, considering oneself as binational is a reflection that occurs in the diaspora, a condition that is characterized by the insistence of individuals not only to affirm their identity of origin but also to ratify the identity acquired in the diaspora.

*Taraspanglish Media Project*

The series of videos that make up *Cortos Taraspanglish/Tarasplanglish Shorts* address different sides of the experience of migration and the cultural continuity/discontinuity forged by the Purépecha communities that migrate to Madera, California from Michoacan, Mexico. The shorts were produced for the Taraspanglish Migrant Video Project (2002), an initiative formed by Javier Sámano Chong and the Purépechas Juana Soto Sosa and Aureliano Soto Rita. The project trained migrants in the production of video as a space for reflection and as a tool to inform their communities (in Madera as well as Michoacan) about their rights, obligations, and requirements as Mexican citizens and immigrants in the United States. The main themes addressed by *Taraspanglish Shorts* include the preservation of customs and traditions, political organization, living conditions of the migrants, and ties with members of their communities of origin. The videomakers in the Taraspanglish project also consider the uses of language in migrant contexts, and the combination of three languages (Purépecha or Tarasco, Spanish, and English) is reflected in the name of the project. Shorts produced by the project include: *Danza de la identidad*, *Así son mis días*, *La salida*, *Pues ya ves lo que pasó con ellos*, *Si la migra te detiene*, *Good bye acuerdo migratorio*, *Mexicanos vs mexicanos*, and *What is Taraspanglish?* One of the points of interest of the Taraspanglish project is the use of a variety of strategies that integrate multiple artistic elements and representational techniques that oscillate between fiction and non-fiction, including elements such as docudrama; video recording in studio (*Mexicanos vs mexicanos*);fiction; video-letters; music video style (*Así son mis días*); sketch comedy (*What is Taraspanglish?)*; parody; and performance (*Danza de la identidad*).

A universal aspect of the migrant experience is longing for the place of origin, which can often be encapsulated as a sense of loss. The *Danza de la identidad* short represents this struggle, showing the multiple layers of meaning in diasporic identity by exploring the way nostalgia for the homeland and local traditions are experienced at a distance. *Danza de la identidad* is an intimate portrait of the nostalgia of a Purépecha migrant who longs for the traditional dance of his hometown. The title of this segment appears with other titles that read “Kúrpiti: Danza Celeste/ Hip Hop ¡Cielos que danza!” The next shot presents the black and white image of a young man sitting on the floor and talking directly to the camera which is also on the same low level.

<Fig. 6.4 here> *A young Purépecha longs to perform a traditional dance once again*.

This builds a moment of intimacy between the viewer and the subject while the migrant states: “*Extraño mucho la danza. Ya quiero ir a bailar otra vez ahí, para que vean que todavía puedo* (I miss dancing. Now I want to dance again there for them to see that I can still dance).” Feelings of nostalgia in the confession are accentuated by black and white aesthetics; meanwhile, the framing seems to imprison the man. Thus themes of sadness and loneliness, revealed through sad and lonely characters, are recurrent in films made by diasporic or immigrant filmmakers because, as Naficy points out, “loneliness is an inevitable outcome of transnationality” (55). A diasporic nostalgia involves the idealization of the homeland and the past; consequently, these videos evoke landscape, music, family, monuments, history, and traditions as part of the work of remembrance.

The image following the confession changes from black and white to color. In a studio with a white background we see a music player on the floor, a man enters the frame and turns it on. The individual begins to dance, and although the steps performed seem to be a traditional folk dance, the music that is heard is ¿Me comprendes, Méndez? by the Mexican group Control Machete. <Fig. 6.5 here> *Two generations perform a traditional dance in a diasporic context*.

In the following sequence, Hip Hop is replaced by traditional Purépecha music. This combination comments on the negotiation between the local and the global. In this association of ideas, the directors show how through embodied practices such as dance it is possible to transmit important cultural aspects like traditions and values, as well as make connections between original communities and new ones. By relating Hip Hop and traditional folk dance, the videomakers suggest that it is impossible to escape the influence of the diasporic environments in which they are now living. The choice of Hip Hop music is meaningful since some of the main qualities of this musical style are its political commitment and its search for social justice and empowerment, as well as respect for the cultural differences that coexist in the musical mix. Hip Hop is a musical form that sometimes calls for community renewal, and can be associated with projects of civil resistance. Within the framework of the quest for Indigenous autonomy, Hip Hop is presented as a creative tool that can bring about the cultural and political changes demanded by Indigenous peoples.

Overall, the segments of this project compiled by the videomakers form a series of repertoires about migration that is revealed through the everyday experiences of migrants and their families. The variety of styles of these shorts also gives us an idea of the way the Taraspanglish videomakers conceive their migrant identities: mobile, performative (i.e. the way their identity is enacted), and dynamic. Diasporic Indigenous videomakers have found a vehicle to express their cultural activism by showing how cultural heritage can be adapted in new and changing ways within the everyday life of migrants, challenging the idea that traditions practiced by Indigenous peoples are pure, static, or dying. The Taraspanglish videomakers express through the medium of film that while the culture they live in and the identities that they assume must be situational and fluid, they are also distinct.

In this chapter, you have hopefully come to appreciate the importance of the use of film as a way for Indigenous Latinx creators to review identity categories in the context of migration, on both a discursive and aesthetic level. Many creators have taken on the task of elaborating the meanings of changing identities assumed through the migratory experience. In their media productions, creators make use of the expressive, technical, and conceptual resources learned in their new context while at the same time reflect on the subjectivities of such experiences. Currently, diasporic Indigenous Latinx media creators are an emerging group within the United States. It is important that scholars continue to explore their productions and the thematic and aesthetic approaches they utilize in order to better understand identity formation in migrant contexts.

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