

This piece was written by Roberto Rodriguez and Patrisia Gonzales, fellows of the American Indian Policy and Media Initiative.



THE ALIENS AMONGST US ... OR PEOPLE OF THE SACRED CORN

By Roberto Rodriguez and Patrisia Gonzales

We were being interviewed about our “San Ce Tojuan” documentary on Indigenous memory and the relatedness of all the peoples of the continent, when the phone started ringing off the hook. We had asked listeners of a Spanish-language radio station to call in and speak in their Native tongues. The telephone lines in Madison, Wisc., smoked with Zapotec, Otomie, Nahuatl, Maya and Mixteco speakers. This was not news to us because we know that Otomie elders come north of the border to perform naming ceremonies and bless placentas. Mixteco women organize collectives in the San Joaquin Valley while Nahuatl women with their rebozos, or traditional shawls, participate in parenting forums for “Latino” families in the snowy white community of Madison.

Indian Country is changing all over the hemisphere as Indigenous people refuse to become “the disappeared,” especially at a time when Evo Morales of Bolivia is not simply Bolivia’s president, but arguably the president of Indigenous America.

Since the 1960s, much of the migration from Mexico has been from largely rural populations in states with high Indigenous populations. They are the ones who still place their hands in the earth in both Mexico and the United States. With the wars in Central America of the 1970s and 1980s came the Mayas. Also, numerous Indigenous peoples of the southern cone, such as the Quechua, are settling in places such as New York. And when Indigenous delegates arrive to the United Nations, often hailing from populations in Guatemala, Peru, Ecuador and Bolivia, they connect with the networks of the Indigenous diaspora who assert the right to act communally in the United States.

Uncomfortable Truth

It is often said that this nation was founded upon slavery. While accurate, it would be more accurate to say that it was founded upon, genocide and land theft... and slavery. This genocide was not strictly physical, but also included a genocide of truth, a genocide of memory and a genocide of narrative. This genocide created the first *desaparecidos* or “the disappeared,” by wrenching our ancestors and knowledge(s) from their descendants – the original peoples of Turtle Island or Pacha Mama. In

fact, first to disappear was Pacha Mama. In its place: the Americas. And then the people became Indians, and shortly thereafter, mestizos – peoples purportedly not Indigenous and detached from Pacha Mama.

For many U.S. citizens, all this constitutes uncomfortable truths... not so much because of this ignoble past, but because those genocidal legacies live with us to this day, particularly in terms of how Indigenous peoples are viewed and treated in the United States and throughout this continent. This is most especially true in terms of how this nation views and treats Mexicans and Central Americans, and sometimes South Americans also. These peoples – regardless of legal status – are generally viewed and treated as unwelcome, suspect, illegitimate and nowadays, illegal. And chillingly, these attitudes are beginning to be codified into draconian anti-immigrant laws and ordinances in towns and cities both near and far from the U.S.-Mexico border. Many of these laws pertain to denial of housing and social services, as well as language and cultural enforcement. Not coincidentally, these laws and ordinances do not target Canadians, Europeans or Russian immigrants. Similarly, all this also is being punctuated with legislation that calls for the erection of hundreds of miles of militarized fences and walls along the U.S.-Mexico-border – along with aggressive hunter battalions (the US Customs and Border Patrol) charged specifically with chasing down red-brown peoples anywhere in the country in a modern-day policy of Indian Removal.

As noted, society’s insistence upon continuing to divide up people into legal and illegal categories isn’t simply a matter of how peoples are perceived; it also manifests in dividing people up into human beings with full human rights, and those with fewer rights. Not surprisingly, those in the suspect and illegal categories are primarily red-brown peoples, peoples that society has misnamed Hispanics. This term, which is imposed upon peoples who already rejected en masse 200 years ago the colonization of the Americas by Spain, includes both Indigenous, and what Mexican scholar Guillermo Bonfil Batalla terms, “de-Indigenized Indians” or mestizos (*Mexico Profundo*, 1996). As he notes, an imaginary Mexico has been created by taking away what is “Indian.” Yet that which is Indian in Mexico is so

pervasive that what remains is still Indian. All of these peoples, Mexican scholar Enrique Florescano, asserts, also constitute part of the living culture of Mesoamerica – the thousands-of-years-old maize-based culture from Mexico and Central America (*Memoria Indigena* 1999). And many of these peoples, rather than sit back and wait to be harassed, are nowadays asserting their ancestral rights to live here as full human beings. The year 2006 saw the massive mobilization of millions of Mexicans and Central and South Americans and their allies in protest of anti-immigrant measures. Many Indigenous peoples marched not as immigrants but as the original peoples of this continent. Beyond protesting, many are now openly asserting the right to take their/our rightful place in this society, many are also asserting the right to partake in thousands-of-years old traditions, customs and rituals.

The Maize

Whereas U.S. society sees an invasion of brown hordes, we see families. Whereas society sees aliens, we see people doing what they've been doing for thousands of years – that is, migrating. Whereas this society clings to colonizing and fictionalized narratives (narratives that begin in 1492), our peoples have much older histories and narratives. These include thousands-of-years-old maize narratives that are shared by many peoples of this continent (some can even be seen in the 2,000-year-plus San Bartolo murals in Guatemala that depict the ancient Mayan *Popul Vuh* -- the ancient story of Maize and creation).

Maize, in effect, is who we are – people of corn – a people who have a documented history on this continent for many thousands of years. We are defined by our own histories and narratives – as found in oral traditions and in the many ancient Mexican/Central American Indigenous codices, and not by the actions of Columbus or any other conquistador. If anything, these traditions are kept alive by stories, songs, dances, rituals, ceremonies, customs and traditions... and by our daily sustenance.

Yet, while we have these stories, in a nation that views itself through a black-white binary, it is seemingly difficult to find a place for Indigenous peoples in this society – except in the realm of either denial or long-ago-history best forgotten. Seemingly even more difficult is finding a place for the red-brown peoples from south that have been increasingly migrating into the United States, so much so, that many nativists warn of an ongoing silent invasion. The truth is, red-brown peoples have been migrating from the south since they brought maize from Southern Mexico into what is today

the United States some 5,000 years ago... and again 2,000 years ago when the Hohokam also brought corn and corn culture northward into what is today the U.S. Southwest. and truthfully, Indigenous peoples have been migrating in all directions since time immemorial (Jack Forbes, *Aztecas del Norte*, 1973).

We suggest that the fear of the “browning of the nation” is actually a fear of the re-Indigenization or the Indigenization of the entire continent. In the mindset of many of these xenophobes, the number of brown people is supposed to be decreasing, not increasing. That's what Providence and Manifest Destiny were supposed to be all about: the civilization and de-indigenization of the continent. In plain-speak, that means the extermination of Indigenous peoples.

Beyond mischaracterizing these migrations as invasions, this view is dependant upon viewing these peoples as illegitimate... which is nothing new. Instead, it is an extension of the original European project of declaring the continent void of humanity and empty of human beings, by which was meant Christians. Thus, to view Mexicans and Central Americans in this country as illegitimate and nowadays illegal is little different than when the first Europeans questioned the humanity of Indigenous peoples on this continent. It is an extension of their narrative.

Ethnocide

To do this required that genocide of truth, memory and narrative. This included the assertion that Indigenous peoples were both outside of God and history. They were purportedly not entitled to live, possess lands or have their own history and worldview. They were, however, entitled to live if they renounced everything about themselves, and swore loyalty and gave freely of their labor to the King of Spain and the Church. These delusional beliefs, along with European greed and Indigenous resistance is what triggered the greatest genocides in the history of humanity (aided by foreign diseases). What followed is an ethnocide that continues; to this day, brown people are supposed to view themselves as either descending from peoples who were demonic, or who had no history prior to 1492. That's why for many nativists, Mexicans/Central Americans as illegal aliens computes. Mexicans/Central Americans as full human beings... does not.

That's why part of this societal view includes never viewing these brown peoples – our relatives, as Indigenous. At best, they are assigned the category of mongrels – peoples not worthy of being afforded the dignity of being either fully human nor being worthy of being afforded full human rights. Many people forget

that the oppressive Spanish caste system imposed during the 300-year colonial era was not necessarily a system of racial categorization. Instead, it was a system that was part and parcel to colonialism, which on this continent ensured the dehumanization of non-Europeans. The caste system itself was designed to determine which human beings had full rights (Europeans)... and who merited partial rights or no rights at all. This is where notions of mongrelization – with accompanying fancy names and dozens of categories -- became systematized. The term *mestizo* derives from this very system. It was not a racial descriptor, but a category that said: You are not a full human being, and certainly, you are not entitled to the same rights afforded to full human beings (read European Christians).

Humanity Denied

As Sharon Venne has pointed out in *Our Elders Know Our Rights* (1998), the colonial debate about whether Indigenous peoples were truly human was actually not about whether they were biologically human, but about whether they were entitled to full human rights. In this sense, this too was the objective of the Spanish caste system.

Can it not be said that the same logic is in place today? Regardless of their stated purposes, codified racial/ethnic categories on this continent are a reminder that some human beings are afforded more rights than others... or that some people are considered more human than other. Is this not what the rejection of red-brown peoples in this society tells us? The maintenance of these modern racial categorical schemes tells us that we continue to live in a society not of full human beings, but a society increasingly divided into full human beings and peoples considered less than human. Into this milieu is the rabid xenophobia that threatens to further divide this country into a society of legal and illegal human beings. The irony of course is that it is Indigenous peoples from this continent – who have never been to Europe -- that are being remanded into these illegal categories.

A further irony is that the arguments continue in some quarters – even in Indian country -- as to whether Mexicans/Central Americans are actually Indigenous. Some assert that they are not; that they in fact are *mestizos* or half-breeds... not Indigenous. This is the absurdity of what Western society has bequeathed us; a ferocious debate over notions of legality and illegality and over questions of Indigenous authenticity. Are Mexicans/Central Americans half-Indigenous? One quarter? Blood quantum – part of the U.S. colonial project -- has nowadays been injected into this debate...

Don't they speak a colonial language (Spanish... as if English were not also a colonial language)? Rather than asserting the full humanity of these peoples, this society has us questioning their/our breed... and their/our rightful place in this society. All of these categories and all of these systems of identification have one thing in common; they are arguably part of centuries-old de-Indigenization or Indian extermination projects. Of course, most of the land has already been stolen (occupied America)... and in effect, so too the people (occupied minds). To complete this project requires that genocide of narrative. But regardless of how hard society tries, the thousands-of-years-old maize narratives cannot be completely erased because they are everywhere... mostly hidden in plain sight.

Kernels of Wisdom

We remember a time when a Nahuatl elder addressed some visiting Mexican American teachers at Nahuatl University in Morelos, Mexico. She told them: “Most of you have lost your original [Indigenous] language, your ways and your traditions... but don't for one second doubt that you are indigenous. But if you ever do, eat a tortilla.”

This was a simple reminder that yes, we've been subjected to centuries of colonialism, but as peoples, we survive. And equally important, our stories survive... stories revolving around our thousands-of-years-old maize cultures. Perhaps we cannot claim to have come out of colonialism unscathed... (most of us are displaced peoples), but we in fact are part of maize culture. After all, what is Mexican/Central American culture without maize... without the tortilla? Funny thing about colonialism... the colonialists took the gold, the silver and the land, but they could not destroy the sacred sustenance of the people... Centeotzintli or sacred maize. Centeotzintli is more than what we eat or who we are. It is also where we come from. As scientists say: We are what we eat... and in that sense, what we eat is maize, beans and squash... and chile... plus nopal (cactus), etc. These are foods that not only have not been eliminated, but are increasing in importance, primarily because they are healthy and are the antidote to heart disease, obesity and diabetes, etc.

Taino writer Jose Barreiro once told us that the *mestizo* is either one less Indian or one more Indian waiting to reemerge. In a sense, that is the metaphor of all the red-brown peoples streaming across the artificially imposed U.S.-Mexico border. For us, to be Indigenous is a synonym for being a human being. And yet, perhaps we don't need to enter into rhetorical debates over whether Mexicans/Central Americans are in fact Indigenous. What we assert is that

Mexicans/Central Americans are part of an ancient and living maize culture... a culture that is affirmed virtually every time we eat a meal. And as a friend and Choctaw law student Alicia Seyler once told us, "Isn't that the definition of Indigenous?"

Can Mexicans/Central Americans derive power (political or otherwise) simply from asserting thousands-of-years-old ties and affiliation to maize culture? Other elders have told us that people cease being peoples when they no longer have stories. So in that sense, it begins with our stories... with our narratives. We

belong because we have always belonged. That's the first step of power, belonging. But that assumes that that's what we want, power. Perhaps we simply want to take on the role of our relatives, not as masters, but as caretakers of our Mother.

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