Latin American Research Review (2025), 1–15
doi:10.1017/lar.2025.10084

LARR Latin American Research Review

ARTICLE

Contesting Exclusion and Erasure: The Educational Experiences of Guatemalans in Los Angeles

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(Received 22 March 2024; revised 03 January 2025; accepted 20 April 2025)

Abstract

Adding to the research on Guatemalan migration, this article analyzes semistructured interviews with young adults from the Guatemalan diaspora to understand how they experience exclusion and erasure in K–12 schools in Los Angeles, California. Using Critical Latinx Indigeneities as a framework, the author contextualizes these experiences within transnational histories of Indigeneity and race to unpack the various forms of erasure that students experience, including complex intersections of language, Indigenous background, and nationality. The findings note that Indigenous and non-Indigenous Guatemalans counter these erasures by finding sources of information to understand their community's histories, including looking for information on their own, learning through student organizations, college courses or spaces, and community-based organizations. The author concludes by noting the need for Central American studies spaces that are informed by critical analysis of race and migration.

Keywords: Guatemala; Maya diaspora; indigeneity; critical Latinx indigeneities

Resumen

Como complemento a investigaciones sobre la migración guatemalteca, este artículo analiza entrevistas semiestructuradas con jóvenes de la diáspora guatemalteca para comprender cómo experimentan la exclusión y marginalización en las escuelas primarias y secundarias de Los Ángeles, California. Utilizando Critical Latinx Indigieneities (CLI) como marco teorético, la autora examina las experiencias de los jóvenes dentro de un contexto histórico que toma en cuenta las realidades transnacionales de los pueblos originarios y el racismo que enfrentan en sus propios territorios, cuando migran, y cuando forman parte de la diáspora. Estos marcos históricos iluminan como los jóvenes experimentan la exclusión a través de intersecciones complejas de idioma, origen indígena y nacionalidad. Los hallazgos también señalan que los guatemaltecos indígenas y no indígenas contrarrestan esta marginación encontrando fuentes de información para comprender las historias de su comunidad, incluyendo la búsqueda de información por su propia cuenta, el aprendizaje a través de organizaciones estudiantiles, cursos o espacios universitarios y organizaciones comunitarias. La autora concluye señalando la necesidad de espacios de estudios centroamericanos que se informen mediante un análisis crítico del racismo y la migración.

Palabras claves: Guatemala; diáspora Maya; indígena; Critical Latinx Indigeneities

This article examines the educational experiences of Guatemalan students in Los Angeles, California, to illustrate how exclusion is experienced in schools and the ways that noninstitutionalized spaces become critical sites of transformative learning. I analyze how students articulate the exclusions they confronted and link those interpersonal experiences to larger issues of exclusion and erasure, and I explore how schools became a microcosm for how Indigeneity and Guatemalanness are embodied and lived in the urban city of Los Angeles. While there is a lot that is already known about Latinx educational experiences, the perspectives offered and analyzed here are informed by intra-Latinx racialization processes. This includes critical engagement with how Indigenous and Guatemalan difference is lived within what are classified as "Latinx" neighborhoods. Interviewing young people demonstrates the ongoing need for critical analysis of how students experience this erasure but also actively seek out other spaces and opportunities outside the official classroom to challenge the ways schools perpetuate and normalize erasure.

Literature review: Critical Latinx Indigeneities, indigenous youth, and schools

The theoretical framing for this research is Critical Latinx Indigeneities (CLI). CLI was conceptualized to understand the experiences of Indigenous migrants from Latin America who do not fit into common understandings of Latinx immigrants. Theorizing between the fields of Latinx studies, Native studies, and Latin American studies allowed CLI to articulate that Indigenous diasporas experience the law, migration, and education differently from non-Indigenous Latinxs (Blackwell et al. 2017). One of the contributions of this framework is examining how settler colonialism as a structural and discursive logic is experienced by Indigenous diasporas across international borders. As Shirazi (2019, 481) notes, "Foregrounding racialization processes within diasporic studies is vital, given that identity formation processes affecting diasporic youth operate in relation to their countries of origin as well as in racialization processes in their 'host' countries". For CLI, this means that in addition to thinking about settler colonialism in the United States, scholars should also be aware of settler logics of race in Latin America because these inform why Indigenous people are displaced, and how they engage with other non-Indigenous Latinx migrants. Ultimately, both settler colonialism in Guatemala and settler colonialism in the United States inform the experiences of Indigenous diasporas, including the experiences of youth who are born, raised, and receive most of their education in the United States. As a theory, CLI creates the opportunity for us to have conversations around erasure and exclusion that are attuned to how some experiences may be based on country of origin and others on Indigeneity or class. These at times overlap in intersectional ways and at times are filtered by young people in ways that make sense to them. As a result, for this study, I have not separated out Indigenous and non-Indigenous respondents, because thinking about settler colonialism historically and transnationally makes it so that we must consider multiple racial structures that make relationships to settler countries distinct.

CLI has been a useful framework in education because it helps us grapple with understanding how the settler colonial foundations of schools in the United States have an impact on Indigenous diaspora students and families (Boj Lopez and Grande 2019). Indigenous scholars have demonstrated that the origins of government-mandated education in the US are grounded in using education to justify and perpetuate settler colonialism. This ranges from the most devastating of consequences, like boarding schools, to seemingly mundane curricula critiqued for generating and reproducing settler grammars (Calderon 2014; Grande 2015; Urrieta and Calderon 2019). Daina Sanchez (2018, 313) extends these discourses to also engage how "experiences with mestizo youth

https://doi.org/10.1017/lar.2025.10084 Published online by Cambridge University Press

indicate that negative connotations associated with people of indigenous origin carry over to the United States, where some mestizo immigrants and their children continue to discriminate against people of indigenous origin." This is a reality that multiple scholars have documented (Barillas Chón 2010; Batz 2014; Boj Lopez 2017; López 2019; López and Irizarry 2022). Scholars have also documented what this process looks like in higher education (Kovats Sánchez 2021).

This article bridges the literature on Indigenous diasporas and Central Americans in the United States to analyze how the exclusion of students identified as "Guatemalan" can occur in relation to language, nationality, or Indigeneity. One aspect that makes the Guatemalan experience different from that of other Latinx migrants is the relatively recent Civil War and genocide that became the basis for mass migration to the United States in the 1970s to the present (Commission for Historical Clarification 1999). Guatemala is a settler nation where foreign multinational corporations and local Guatemalan elites have inflicted waves of dispossession over hundreds of years (Batz 2020). These conditions of dispossession and violence have left a legacy that continues to make poverty and violence leading factors in emigration from Guatemala (Hiskey et al. 2018). Even as various sectors of society seek justice for the crimes committed during the war and genocide (Boj Lopez 2020; Burt 2021; Arroyo Calderón 2020), migration has continued to serve as a pressure release valve for the precarity many Indigenous and poor people face in Guatemala (Isaacs 2022). While settler colonialism primarily developed out of analyzing the condition of Indigenous peoples in the Global North, scholars in Latin American studies have argued that applying this frame ensures that we do not consider settler occupation of Latin America as complete and ignore the ongoing struggle over Indigenous land claims, autonomy, and governance (Speed 2017). Castro and Picq (2017) have done the work of taking this question on from a historical perspective, and scholars like Batz (2020) have also provided frames for understanding this ongoing coloniality as part of a series of invasions into Maya territory.

In Guatemala, Indigenous people are the demographic majority, but because they have been systematically excluded and exploited, they are often marginalized as a social group. It is especially important for scholars who examine the experiences of Guatemalan migrants in the United States to understand that this exclusion is a deeply entrenched racial and colonial project (Allweiss 2021). The clearest example of how migration and ongoing settler colonialism are deeply intertwined is the most recent genocide of the Mayas in the 1980s. The Commission for Historical Clarification (1999) documents that from 1960 to 1996, entire villages in Guatemala were massacred, children were stolen and sold for international adoption at very high rates, and to this day, fewer than five thousand of the over forty-five thousand disappeared have been identified (Posocco 2015; Forensic Anthropology Foundation of Guatemala 2020). The Commission for Historical Clarification (1999) report states that government forces were responsible for 93 percent of these abuses, and Maya people represented over 80 percent of the victims. For the Commission for Historical Clarification, the state violence of the Civil War and genocide is "a reflection of [Guatemala's] colonial history." Alongside this state violence is a discursive logic that positions people who speak Indigenous languages and wear Maya dress as backward, uneducated, and inferior to Ladinos (non-Indigenous Guatemalans). These historical, political, and economic contexts shape everyday life in Guatemala and should inform how we think about the experiences of Guatemalans in the diaspora and Guatemalan students in US schools.

In the case of Guatemala, race and racism are often reduced to an Indigenous and non-Indigenous binary that oversimplifies race by erasing all forms of Blackness, Asian communities, and the ways that elites have worked to maintain Criollo status. Importantly, Ladino has shifted across historical contexts but is now defined as non-Indigenous (Martínez Salazar 2012; Gudmundson and Wolfe 2010; Hale 2004, 2006). Ultimately, this

https://doi.org/10.1017/lar.2025.10084 Published online by Cambridge University Press

demonstrates that while Ladino has its own nuance and diversity, it still connotes a superiority to Indigeneity regardless of one's actual heritage and ancestry. In the context of migration, Ladinidad often goes unmarked, and very little research has paid attention to how Guatemalan Ladinos experience Latinidad in particular. Research, however, does document that Indigenous Guatemalans, especially Mayas, make concerted efforts to carve out a multitude of spaces in diaspora, including hometown associations, nonprofits, grassroots collectives, *fiestas patronales*, music groups, interpretation networks, youth programs, community gardens, multimedia programs, and so on. As a result, part of what is often labeled "Guatemalan" in the United States is dependent on Indigenous cultural practices, and that conflation makes it challenging to disentangle the distinctions between the category of Guatemalan and those of Maya, Indigenous, and Ladino in the US. For this study, I am less interested in whether the discrimination Guatemalans primarily face is racism, ethnic discrimination, xenophobia, and so on. I am instead noting that in different moments, these complex structures are brought to bear on youth in the diaspora and that they themselves struggle to make sense of these because schools and educators dismiss the nuance of these identities.

One of the ways that this erasure takes shape at schools is the inability of educators and schools to understand the specificity of being Guatemalan, or even Central American. As Coronado and Paredes (2018, 12) write, "[Central American students] felt there was an automatic assumption that if any student would 'look' Latinx that their background was Mexican. The majority of students indicated their Central American background was not recognized, nor valued by school officials." For Central American students, including Guatemalan students, there is the experience of having to claim a nation-based identity outside of and in tension with presumed Mexicanness when Mexican heritage people are the dominant Latinx population, as they are in the US Southwest. "Mexican" itself is not a stagnant, seamless, homogeneous category, but for the sake of this article, the issue I seek to highlight is that for Guatemalan students in Los Angeles, claiming a national identity as "Guatemalan" may be less about a sense of belonging to the Guatemalan settler nation than claiming a sense of belonging to a diasporic community that is not of Mexican origin.

The issue with a broadly applied label of "Mexican" has been a point of scholarly interest in the literature on Indigenous diasporic youth. This set of literature directly documents that when Latinidad is defined as Mexican mestizo, it excludes Indigenous Mexican youth. For instance, Barillas Chón (2010, 313) notes that in Oaxaca, there is a substantial concentration of Indigenous people that makes their diasporic experiences with other Mexican migrant communities in California distinct. He documents that when "asked about why and how racism and discrimination against Oaxaqueños/as happens, the students explained that such practices are based on (a) language use, (b) being perceived as 'dummies' and inferior, (c) and being perceived as different and inferior because of their physical appearance." Scholars have also documented the struggle to affirm Zapotec Indigeneity despite racism experienced at the hands of non-Indigenous Mexicans (Sanchez 2018; Nicolas 2021; Martinez and Mesinas 2019).

In the case of the Guatemalan diaspora, research about Mayas who have attended schools in the United States found that Maya youth struggle to have their Maya background understood and have a wide range of responses from being proud to preferring to use the terms *Hispanic* or *Latino* on school forms (Batz 2014). This issue of "Mexican" as a whole being perceived as a superior status has affected youth in schools as well. Lebaron (2012, 186), for instance, wrote, "A young lady explained that when she went to school the first day, knowing little English or Spanish, she was ashamed; however, children, she said, would claim they were Mexican because they thought it a higher status." In O'Connor and Canizales's (2023) work, they find that anti-Indigenous racism across borders results in what young Mayas describe as *timidez* and *miedo* (shyness and fear). These studies are all critical to understanding how young Guatemalans and Mayas

https://doi.org/10.1017/lar.2025.10084 Published online by Cambridge University Press

understand their experiences of migration and marginalization that begin at the point of migration but continue to play out in school settings. This literature points to important tensions that exist around identity, nationality, and Indigeneity for those typically understood as "Latinx." It is critical to note that much of this research has taken place in the US Southwest, where Latinx communities are substantial, and many schools in California, for example, are overwhelmingly Latinx. This is partially what allows us to look at Guatemalan experiences in relation to the forms of Latinidad produced in this region of the US. These tensions are a result of deeply entrenched histories of dispossession, and it is interesting to see how those labeled "Guatemalan" come to experience and navigate this complex matrix of domination (Hill Collins 1991).

Methodology

This research consists of in-depth semistructured interviews. Interviews for this study were taken from a larger set of interviews conducted to understand how Mayas who are active in Maya spaces in the diaspora maintain or create sites of intergenerational exchange, historical memory, and a refusal of settler logics. The larger study utilized an inductive approach (Liu 2016) that looked at organized community spaces led by Maya young adults, even if they included non-Maya Guatemalans in the group. Methodologically speaking, the inductive approach is suited for qualitative studies where researchers are interested in themes that emerge directly from interviewees. While the larger study was focused on organized community spaces that these young adults participated in, after coding the data, attending public schools in Los Angeles emerged as a salient experience for the interviewees.

The interviews lasted anywhere from forty-five minutes to two hours and focused on family migration histories, childhood experiences, learning Guatemalan history, joining organized collectives, and the work they have done with such collectives. The interviews for this article were done with fourteen young adults who are part of the Guatemalan diaspora in Los Angeles, and they range from 1.5 to 2nd generation (those who migrated as children to the United States and those born in the United States). The interviewees were between eighteen and thirty years old at the time of the interviews. Some of these interviewees had clear and consistent ties to their Maya or Xinca Indigenous community, while others understood themselves only as Indigenous and not Ladino.

After conducting focused coding for the larger study, I aggregated codes that dealt specifically with education and schools and organized them into themes around interactions with peers, interactions with teachers, learning Guatemalan history, and so on. Once this smaller subset of data was analyzed through a second round of focused coding, I searched for common themes among the interviews and emphasized those in the findings. While educational experiences were not the primary focus of the initial interviews, many interviewees discussed first experiencing erasure in clear and concrete ways at school. For many, these earlier experiences became normalized until they began understanding and learning more about Guatemalan history.

Findings

The excerpts shared here clarify how interpersonal experiences point to larger structural conditions that normalize how anti-Indigenous policies and attitudes exist in many institutions, including schools. Given this experience at schools, I also sought to understand where, how, and why these young people begin to engage their own history. One of the salient findings was that many of these young people learn about their histories by engaging outside of their formal classes and in community building, even if it is through

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non-Maya or non-Guatemalan spaces or courses. Studying the impact of erasure and the ways young people begin to contest this erasure, we can begin to tease out the need to continue creating spaces where young people can unlearn or challenge the notion that Indigeneity or Guatemalan history should be marginal or nonexistent.

Schools as sites of exclusion

While most of this article focuses on the experiences of Indigenous and Guatemalan youth who attend predominantly Latinx schools, it is important to note that the few interviewees who attended predominantly white schools or magnet programs felt excluded from their white peers. One interviewee, Evelyn, is a young woman who understands herself as Indigenous, although she does not have relatives that tie her to a specific land-based community and is still defining what that means for her and her family in the context of genocide and migration. She initially attended a school where most students were white and affluent. During the interview she stated, "My grandma would come and pick me up [in elementary school], and I would never speak Spanish with her at school just because the only other people that I saw speaking Spanish a lot of times were the nannies of these richer white kids, who would come and take care of them." This experience demonstrates the complex intersections of race, language, gender, and labor. While language is not a stand-in for race, racio-linguistics research reminds us that the hierarchies of languages remain rooted in a colonial ideology of European supremacy that in the US also presents itself as devaluing Spanish because it comes from Latin America (Rosa and Flores 2017). Evelyn articulates this exclusion vis-à-vis US whiteness and English language rather than nationality or Indigeneity, although she identifies as Indigenous. It is important to acknowledge that while Indigenous language speakers are especially marginalized, Indigenous people who speak Spanish are also facing exclusion when they are in predominantly white spaces. In addition, as Vera-Rosas and Guerrero (2021) argue, there is a coloniality of language that shapes how hierarchies around language cohere or define racialized and classed experiences and—in a global contemporary context English (rather than Indigenous language, Spanish, or Portuguese)—represents a level of privilege. I begin with this example because it shows the many ways we can understand the exclusion faced by this particular diaspora.

One of the sites where these narratives of difference, exclusion, and erasure become articulated is in early experiences with other students. For instance, Ana shared the following experience when I asked her about her earliest memories around being Maya:

> I also remember negative things, like at school when being made fun of, like, Oh, you're Indian, and it wasn't like in the sense where, I guess, because I didn't speak Spanish, I didn't know what it was like, what would they call them, like *india* or whatever. They would basically kind of mix me up with the Native Americans here and then dance circles around me.

There are several notions to unpack in Ana's experience of difference at school. While the other students were Latinos, the other children were aware that Ana represented a difference that was related to Indigeneity. The specific attitudes conveyed by these students were premised on interpreting Ana as an Indigenous person but expressing disdain for that experience through racist tropes of Native people. The bullying from the other children is based on pejorative ideas about Native people, yet applied to a Maya diaspora subject. The connections around Indigeneity across settler borders are already being recognized by non-Indigenous Latinx children and seem to indicate that how we educate or miseducate around Native history and sovereignty shapes the experience of Indigenous diasporic children.

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When I asked Ana what had prompted her peers to do this, she shared that it was because she did not speak Spanish. Her peers interpreted her family's inability to speak Spanish as being too proud, and she struggled to get them to understand that it was because the family spoke an Indigenous language. She went on to share:

> I did go through a phase where I was just angry at the fact that we as people from Latin America, we're just all grouped into one and assumed that we all just have this Spanish language . . . . I do remember specifically being angry at the fact that [my peers] didn't know there was Indigenous folks there and other languages, so that was one of the reasons I stopped identifying as a Latina. I felt like identifying as a Latina, people didn't really include Indigenous people.

Ana's experience is important to unpack in relation to Evelyn's. Both are Indigenous and felt excluded because of language, but the demographics of the school played a critical role in terms of whether the exclusion was based on not speaking English or not speaking Spanish. It is also important to note that Ana was raised with stories about the genocide against the Maya people that led to her family being refugees, and this critical analysis of Indigenous dispossession was present in the home alongside a clear discourse that Maya languages were valued. As a result, when we talk about the experiences of "Latinx" students, we should consider thinking across settler borders and how issues of Indigenous genocide, like those that took place in Guatemala, also shape how Indigenous people engage with or refuse particular definitions of Latinidad. Bringing Evelyn's and Ana's stories together complicates the desire to define either Latinx or Indigenous communities as monolithic in terms of languages used or how they are treated in schools. These early experiences with peers also demonstrate that exclusion within this diaspora can be from language, class, and labor, but it can also be from more direct exclusions based on race, nation, and Indigeneity (Barillas Chón 2019). In some cases, these elements are lived at once, and in other cases, there are salient moments in which discrimination is functioning primarily through one of these lenses. In articulating the discrimination experienced in the Indigenous and Guatemalan diaspora, we should also pay attention to how otherness is being produced on the basis of context, in order to be able to bring these conversations together without necessarily collapsing the internal differences among Guatemalan youth in diaspora.

In addition to exclusion based on language, respondents shared that, like Coronado and Paredes's (2018) findings, their cultures were erased through educators' and schools' emphasis on Mexican history and culture. It is important to unpack these practices because, for Guatemalans, regardless of being Indigenous or not, there is an incentive to hide by identifying as Mexican in public settings. This has been documented in research as a specific "strategy of survival" for undocumented Indigenous migrants from countries that are south of Mexico, but little attention has been paid to how this strategy affects children (Castañeda et al. 2002). For instance, in my sample, two interviewees noted that they had internalized these beliefs, and for part of their childhood, they thought Guatemala was part of Mexico. One interviewee, Raul (they/them) stated, "They said make sure [you say] you're *mexicano*. Then when I started going to school, we wouldn't talk a whole lot about Guatemala and that kind of stuff, even though we had *recuerdos de Guatemala*. I didn't completely think 'Oh, I'm completely Mexican,' at least I knew I wasn't completely Mexican." Both of Raul's parents were born and raised in Guatemala, as was Raul, until they migrated to the US with their mom. Given the pressure of being undocumented and the ever-looming threat of deportation, hiding as Mexican is an important strategy, but interviewees in this study noted that this heightens the silences around being Guatemalan in Mexican-dominant communities.

https://doi.org/10.1017/lar.2025.10084 Published online by Cambridge University Press

One interviewee, Jenny, who at the time of the interview identified as Xinca, noted that her brother had thought this as well, but had also attributed it to the fact that his school emphasized Mexican cultural celebrations in a generalizable manner. Jenny shared the following:

> Yeah, my brother has a story that he likes to share a lot where he—in my school he remembers ... there's a lot of history around Mexican independence and learning *folkórico* and stuff, and so he remembers that he thought that Guatemala was just an extension of Mexico, or that it was in Mexico, and he didn't get it. He just thought that he was Mexican, like Guatemalan was a subidentity, and it wasn't until later on that he realized it's its own country and it has its own unique history, so he always says that "for the first five years of my life I thought I was Mexican."

While Jenny thought this was funny, it also points to the conversations that are not happening in schools, even though so much social-emotional learning happens in the earliest years of life. Scholars have found that for Mexican heritage children and Chicanas/os, *folkórico* can be a transformative experience anchored in a sense of heritage, family, history, culture, and pride, something these scholars mark as critical given the alienation or oppressive experiences Mexican heritage and Chicana/o children may have (Nájera-Ramírez 2009; Johnson et al. 2022). *Folkórico,* however, takes dances from various regions and consolidates them as "Mexican" to promote Mexican nationalism that ultimately "can be read as a discourse of racial hierarchy by a colonialist mentality" (Hutchinson 2009, 223). When *folkórico* is required in public schools and done in a generalizable manner as Latinx cultural celebrations—or when it is the only cultural celebration—it effectively erases critical differences for non-Mexican communities. For children in the Guatemalan diaspora who also experience deep disorientation because of migration and family silence due to being undocumented, schools become sites of ongoing erasure where logics around Latinidad vis-à-vis Mexican become normalized and enacted in peer-to-peer interactions as well as in school-sponsored activities.

The young people in this sample understood early on that Guatemalan history was not engaged in their mainstream K–12 education. However, many expressed that their ongoing desire to find belonging and information led them to various spaces that created the opportunity for them to learn more about their community. This speaks to the agency of those included in this sample, who, as I noted, became leaders in various social justice spaces that then allowed them to learn about their own history.

Participants learning Guatemalan history

While examining these complex and varied forms of erasure or exclusion is important, it is also necessary to consider how the youth of the Guatemalan diaspora also actively respond to these issues. As Shirazi (2019, 480) argues, "Diasporic educational spaces and programs are critical sites to gain insight into the lived experiences of minoritized diasporic youth, insofar as such spaces contribute to affirming conceptions of identity and help youth to imagine themselves apart from dehumanizing representations of their communities and countries of origin." In this context of mundane erasure and exclusion, respondents noted that they became much more aware of Guatemalan history or Indigenous Guatemalan histories through three avenues: self-education, community learning spaces, and college or university experiences. Often, self-education was a first step for young people to learn more about their histories without having to ask their relatives. As Abrego (2017) notes for Salvadorans, denying their experiences as refugees perpetuates silences around history, politics, and lived experiences. While Abrego details this for Salvadorans in the United States, others have

https://doi.org/10.1017/lar.2025.10084 Published online by Cambridge University Press

pointed to similar trends among Central Americans more generally (Coronado and Paredes 2018). In my sample, eleven out of fourteen respondents attempted to learn about Guatemalan history on their own. For instance, Jenny noted trying to search on Google or Amazon for books about Xinca people but found that there really weren't any available in the early 2000s. Abby, another respondent, noted, "Knowing the history I think is good, but I feel like at the same time, yeah, if I didn't go out and look for it, I would have never been told this history." These attempts at teaching themselves their own history demonstrate that the efficacy of self-education is dependent on the availability of materials to learn from that are accessible, as well as spaces to be able to engage in that learning.

Despite the challenges of trying to self-educate, having communal spaces or opportunities to access information more easily or even meet others from the community becomes a critical opportunity. Thirteen of the fourteen respondents in my sample did not participate in organized Indigenous community spaces with their families while growing up in Los Angeles. Nonetheless, for seven of the interviewees, the opportunity to engage Guatemalan history and culture arrived while they were high school students, and they decided to join community or student organizations that were not Indigenous specific. As Veronica Terriquez (2015) has documented in relation to immigrant rights and LGBTQ organizing, there is a social movement spillover that happens during which youth get involved in one social movement but become much more intersectional in their thinking and organizing as a result. In the case of one interviewee, learning about the larger history of Guatemala occurred in relation to their experiences as a youth organizer in the immigrant rights movement, the environmental justice movement, and in relation to joining a queer collective as well. Raul shared, "I went from a person that felt very voiceless because I felt like . . . yeah, so I think throughout my childhood, I grew up very quiet. This time I was like, People actually care what I have to say, so I was able to really come out of my shell." The spaces that Raul participated in were welcoming to both him and his Kaqchikel grandmother, who would wear Maya clothing to various demonstrations and protests. It was a staff member at the organization who gave Raul his first book specifically about the Guatemalan Civil War. However, he stated, "The book is on folks . . . one who's a soldier and the other one who was a salesperson. It's different stories, but a lot of tragedy. The entire time I was crying . . . . That was actually the first time I've read about the war or even had knowledge around war stuff." While silence around Guatemalan history is an issue, Raul's experience also highlights that, in teaching about violence against Mayas, educators, adult mentors, and community leaders need to craft a supportive space for processing the experience of learning about these histories and ongoing issues.

While Raul primarily participated in spaces that were not Latinx specific, for other interviewees, Chicanx collectives that had been established during the 1960s movement became a site for them to also engage in their own history. In Boj Lopez (2017), I highlighted that Chicanx-specific spaces have been critical to the politicization of some Guatemalans. For instance, Abby noted that she first learned about Guatemalan history as a high school student, but not in her actual classes. She discussed that as a high school student, she became a youth organizer with MEChA, which connected her to college-aged Central Americans who were also working through MEChA to create more spaces for Central Americans. She shared:

> That's where I first heard it, at the Raza Youth Conference here at USC. It was older Guatemalans being in this space that wanted to make sure that people knew that history, and so I feel like that's where it blew me away, I was like, What? And that's really where I learned it and was like, I need to look into it and see what was going on during this time, and it [made me want] to be more involved. Had I not gone or had I not ever joined MEChA, I don't know if I would have really heard this history—where would I have heard it from?

https://doi.org/10.1017/lar.2025.10084 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Central Americans have noted that, while MEChA and other Chicanx organizations were spaces that Central Americans organized through and led, Chicanx spaces have been exclusionary, unwelcoming, and dismissive of Central Americans and their experiences. This has led to the formation of Central American–specific spaces that have created more focused and expansive spaces to center Central American histories, experiences, movement building, and creative expressions.

Community-based spaces where Guatemalan histories are discussed can have an impact on what is possible at schools, even if the community-based space does not take place on a school campus. For example, Evelyn participated in a community project that was photography based and brought together young Guatemalan girls from multiple public high schools in greater Los Angeles. The group met in the afternoons at a community organization, but when she began doing her own photography, she was able to create critical, albeit temporary, moments of connection at high school. She noted:

> There were a lot of Guatemalan girls at [the high school], which I think for a long time had been referring to themselves as Mexican just because there's a stigma around not being Mexican, even at school. The one day that we invited them all, we had food and we took pictures. It was really beautiful.

In this case, the work Evelyn was collaboratively engaging in a community space gave her a politicized understanding of being stigmatized for being Guatemalan. More importantly, it also gave her the opportunity to create a space at the school that could momentarily interrupt this stigma so that her peers could celebrate their Guatemalan and Maya selves at school. In other words, community-based efforts, while not located at school sites, can still support the way K–12 students challenge their erasure and instead center their own community.

Other respondents noted that college was where they really began to dig deeply into how their and their family histories were shaped by larger structural realities in Guatemala. This primarily occurred in courses that were not specifically about Central Americans or Guatemala, but in which educators questioned structures of power and inequality and worked to extend various course materials to the Maya or Guatemalan experience. For instance, Michael noted that he learned about the Maya genocide in a queer studies course:

> It was the first time [the university] developed queer studies and there [my professor] was talking about Rigoberta [Menchú] and all the massacres . . . . She was like, how does that connect to the erasure of Native people and how does it connect to queer people and stuff and it was more like just seeing that oppression and erasure, like how does that connect to queer indigenous studies. Yeah, it was really cool, she used like three weeks talking about it.

These additional spaces represent the need to connect fields like Chicanx studies, queer studies, and Latin American studies to open more routes for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Guatemalans in the diaspora.

In addition to formal class settings at college, college also created spaces that were grounded in the experience of facing exclusions and, in that manner, allowed interviewees to find others with similar backgrounds. For instance, two respondents in my sample, Ana and Araceli, met while they were at a large, elite, primarily white research institution. That campus has a communal space that many students of color visit, study, and generally find others to engage with. Ana shared:

https://doi.org/10.1017/lar.2025.10084 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> Students just randomly go in there and study or just chill between classes and I was there just reading my book and . . . I just remember [Araceli] saying something about Beatriz Manz and I remember I had been looking into Beatriz Manz, because she wrote a couple of books on the Maya folks of Guatemala and I just remember hearing her name and I was just like, Oh my god, you had that professor, too? I really want to take a class with her, but she didn't have the class this semester, and that's just kind of how we started talking.

This exchange led both young women to talk about being Guatemalan, and as they shared more, they realized they were both Q'anjob'al and born and raised in Los Angeles. These moments of exchange require physical spaces where students are more likely to meet, as well as faculty teaching courses that may also encourage them to find one another. Similar to affinity groups, these spaces create opportunities to delve deeper into particular histories that can be neglected as marginal (Oto and Chikkatur 2019).

One of the people I interviewed was Olivia, a Guatemalan youth organizer born and raised in Los Angeles who joined a community-based project soon after her ninety-eight-year-old grandfather passed away. Before his passing, she had been having conversations with her grandfather to document not only his story but also as much as he could remember about his parents and grandparents to be able to understand their internal displacement within Guatemala across several generations. Like many Indigenous people in Guatemala, across these generations, her family had been displaced multiple times, and Olivia was working to understand how that related to her own Guatemalan and Indigenous identity when her grandfather became ill and passed away. She joined a community project geared toward the Maya community despite her own hesitancy at identifying as such, and it became an opportunity for her to expand how she thought about Indigeneity. However, one of the greatest lessons she learned in the process was that the ability to know historical context was critical to future generations. As Olivia stated:

> I hope that we can continue to create more of these spaces. Especially for the younger generations because I'm even thinking of third and fourth generations now, your kids, Flori. My own nieces and nephews, how do we continue to preserve our own Indigenous cultures and traditions? I think even now in my lifetime, we're losing a lot of folks, we're living in a pandemic, so being able to preserve that and having these spaces that allow us to do that.

For Olivia, advocating for a critical awareness of Guatemalan experiences with transnational structures and ideologies of race, racism, Indigeneity, and migration is grounded in a desire to guide future generations. Olivia's desire to create spaces can and should include schools; however, it is not a question of representation, reconciliation, or even improving settler institutions. Many of my respondents first felt their exclusion in these educational institutions, and that sense of marginalization often followed them past K–12. All the respondents in this sample became active in community spaces or became community leaders who worked with youth in a wide array of capacities. For many of them, engaging educational institutions is only one strategy among many to create more space for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Guatemalan histories and experiences to be shared in the diaspora.

Discussion

The spaces that currently exist where members of the Guatemalan diaspora recount the experiences of grandparents in Guatemala and the experiences of migrant and diasporic

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generations are possible mainly because of the grassroots work of community members. As this research shows, in the lives of the interviewees, many did not learn about Guatemala in formal educational settings, yet this learning has happened through community-led projects, in student organizations at schools, and in universities. These have been critical spaces to transmit cultural memory and think intersectionally.

Understanding the exclusion that Guatemalans face through a Critical Latinx Indigeneities framework allows us to see that labeling exclusion as solely related to ethnicity, racism, anti-Indigeneity, or xenophobia belies how intertwined many of these forms of exclusion are. Settler colonialism may be imposed differently across settler borders; however, in the experiences of the Indigenous diaspora from Latin America, these become intertwined, as Native stereotypes are also used to make sense of Indigenous diasporic difference. Using a Critical Latinx Indigeneities framework, Alberto (2017, 250) writes: "The frameworks available to me in which to situate and contextualize my Yalaltecan identity were the histories, names, and pressures exerted on US Native Americans. I did not see myself as a US Native American, but I instinctually knew that the colonial logics 'Indian' and not 'India' were at work on my body and my subjectivity along with Mexican and Latina." Alberto articulates the layers through which the Indigenous diaspora can be read, which include anti-Native discourses. Critical Latinx Indigeneities facilitates this ability to read across these layered experiences precisely because it can articulate that Indigenous elimination can involve complex systems of meaning that are not singular. Blackwell et al. (2017) write, "Critical Latinx Indigeneities unpacks the particularities of these Indigenous Latinx multilayered experiences that invite a more nuanced and profound knowledge and reflection on history and racial constructions and subordination across various national and international contexts." For the Guatemalan diaspora, being Indigenous, Guatemalan, and immigrant becomes a layered experience that informs how young people articulate their exclusion. In other words, Guatemalans are not solely excluded because they are not Mexican. Like Ana's experience demonstrates, being Indigenous also plays a role for some Guatemalans, but this is not necessarily true for all Guatemalans either. In addition, while Indigenous language rights are highlighted as a critical site of Indigenous survival, for someone like Evelyn, even her Indigenous grandmother speaking Spanish in a white, English-speaking context was enough to make her feel marginalized. Critical Latinx Indigeneities creates a theoretical space from which to understand race, nationality, Indigeneity, and language as distinct yet at times interrelated forces.

As highlighted in the second half of the article, the Guatemalan diaspora also finds and creates spaces from which to contest their complex exclusion or erasure. The respondents for this study were drawn from organized spaces that engage Maya and Guatemalan communities, and as a result, many of them articulated the process of learning about their communities' histories. Recognizing these organized spaces as critical to the continuity of cultural memory also demonstrates that Guatemalan and Indigenous diasporas are active agents that interrupt settler colonial projects when they participate in intersectional organizing. Many Guatemalan students in Los Angeles continue to have limited access to higher education, return trips to their homelands, and even community spaces and schools that can play a role in affirming Indigenous and non-Indigenous Guatemalan experiences. Educational institutions that serve Indigenous migrant and Latinx communities bear a responsibility in understanding these contexts. Without an adequate attempt to understand these nuances around nationality, displacement, and Indigeneity, schools run the risk of reproducing the homogenization of Latinx students that erases Indigenous diasporic experiences and Central American experiences. As Alberto (2017, 252) notes, "Even radical and counter-hegemonic narratives rooted in mestizaje, while liberating for many Chicanos/as and Latinas/os, can feel oppressive for Indigenous Latinas/os".

https://doi.org/10.1017/lar.2025.10084 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Recommendations

Contesting the exclusion and erasure of Guatemalan and Maya students would require that institutions understand and respect the knowledge that communities possess. My findings demonstrate that what Urrieta (2016) terms *transnational diasporic community knowledge* can also include learning to understand Indigenous or Guatemalan difference in predominantly Mexican and white spaces. Many of the respondents from my study had to learn how to seek out information, and in doing so, they also learned how to create sites of knowledge sharing through workshops, photography, social media, and so on. However, much of this was predicated on not having access through family or schools for a historical understanding of what it means to be Maya, Xinca, Garifuna, or Guatemalan in diaspora. This can also be useful for how we conceptualize learning from the experiences of older generations of diasporic Guatemalans to inform what is needed for the future of Maya, Xinca, or Garifuna communities.

Creating community-based learning spaces outside of schools is critical because, as education scholars have documented, educational institutions are structured through white supremacist and settler foundations of schools in the United States. However, we must also consider how to bring the critical lens and perspective that Indigenous and non-Indigenous Guatemalans I interviewed get from their college experiences into the spaces that Central American young people are legally mandated to attend, such as K–12 public schools. Challenging the settler grammars of schools is critical to a future in which not only the Guatemalan diaspora can share communal knowledge but also communities can be empowered to look at the differences within the community to disrupt the power structures that still exist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Guatemalans.

Conclusion

My research demonstrates that schools are important sites where students become aware of and enact various dimensions of difference. Looking at these experiences from the sites of language, Indigeneity, and multicultural celebrations that reproduce erasure highlights that exclusion is experienced through multiple structures that cannot be reduced to solely race, Indigeneity, migration, nationality, or language. Ultimately, many of the young people I interviewed acknowledged that it was because their own classrooms were not engaging in this critical learning that they sought out their own avenues of learning about Guatemala. While this is an important part of their own agency as learners, it is out of a lack of access that this becomes necessary.

Acknowledgments. I would like to thank the anonymous *LARR* reviewers for their generous and thoughtful feedback. I would also like to thank the interviewees who shared their time and stories with me. Your reflections inspire me to continue creating a better world inside and outside of the classroom.

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Cite this article: Boj Lopez, Floridalma. Contesting Exclusion and Erasure: The Educational Experiences of Guatemalans in Los Angeles. *Latin American Research Review*. https://doi.org/10.1017/lar.2025.10084