

# INDIGENOUS AUTHORS ON THEIR OWN HISTORY AND CULTURE

*June Nash*

*The City University of New York*

**Intimate Indigenities: Race, Sex, and History in the Small Spaces of Andean Life.** By Andrew Canessa. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012. Pp. xiv + 325. \$26.95 paper. ISBN: 9780822352679.

**Otavalan Women, Ethnicity, and Globalization.** By Linda D'Amico. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2010. Pp. xiv + 232. \$60.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780826349910.

**The Journey of a Tzotzil-Maya Woman of Chiapas, Mexico: Pass Well over the Earth.** By Christine Eber and "Antonia." Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011. Pp. xvii + 244. \$55.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780292726659.

Recognition of ethnic diversity in multicultural nations of the Americas is changing relationships in domestic and in public life. The three books reviewed here exemplify the evolving methodological and conceptual frameworks that are ongoing in anthropology as scholars attempt to describe and analyze the impact of multicultural coexistence. The cultural revolutions related to civil rights and gender rights that took place in the 1960s and 1970s are now bearing fruit in academic publications that reflect the greater concern with everyday political and social changes that enter intimate spheres and also engage with changing relations of what were marginalized sectors in nation states and occupational spheres.

The works under review cover the Kichua-speaking Otavalan community of Peguche, Ecuador, the Aymara speakers of Wila Kjarka in Bolivia, and the Tzotzil speakers of Chenalhó in the Mexican state of Chiapas. The authors are more explicit about their collaboration with consultants in those communities than were most authorities in the past. All three anthropologists draw upon long-term, repeated visits, allowing them to envision the interactions among three generations as their early contemporaries became grandparents and in turn their children became parents. Within this generational nexus lie profound transformations as people cope with forced mobility in a globalizing world that is changing before their eyes.

In their assessments of these changes, all three of the anthropologists raise the question: What does it mean to be indigenous since the national awakening in the last quarter of the twentieth century? That awakening was marked by the first National Indian Congress in Mexico, initiated by the Catholic Diocese in 1974. The discussions there anticipated constitutional changes in 1992 that recognized the multicultural basis of Mexico. Similar changes in national constitutions oc-

curred in Bolivia in 1994 and Ecuador in 1998. The quincentennial anniversary on October 12, 1992, of the “discovery” of America celebrated five hundred years of indigenous peoples retaining their cultural identities, some in states with large minorities or even majorities, as in Bolivia. Other Latin American countries that are not treated in these volumes, including Brazil, Guatemala, Paraguay, Peru, and Venezuela, have also made constitutional changes recognizing multiculturalism and reflecting the hemispheric movement toward multiethnic participation in governance.

#### ETHNICITY AS IDENTITY AND PRACTICE

In *Otavalan Women, Ethnicity, and Globalization*, Linda D’Amico has taken the earlier ethnography of Peguche written by the accomplished anthropologist Elsie Clews Parsons in the 1940s as a benchmark for comparing her own contemporary ethnography from 1989 to 1997. D’Amico gives full credit to Parsons for her recognition of interculturalism and her “feminist methodology.” By this she means Parsons’s positive portrayal of women’s agency in the highly developed entrepreneurial and marketing activities that characterized Otavalan society. Because Otavalans had been involved in an intercultural commercial center for textiles and vegetable products since prehistory, they were sophisticated entrepreneurs.

This is an important theme in D’Amico’s work as she shows us how “women actively rework traditions to suit the contingencies of everyday life” (9). Women’s ability to manipulate symbols of cultural identity was, she asserts, the basis for Otavalans’ endurance as a distinctive group. This is evident in the artisanal products they make, wear, and sell. These are constantly changing as artisans respond to aesthetic impulses of the buyers yet remain attentive to Otavalan themes and talents. Women’s entry into relations with foreigners inside and beyond the borders of Ecuador enables them to promote the relations of indigenous groups in their networks with foreign agents to help cope with globalizing trends that have disinherited other ethnic groups.

D’Amico introduces us to Parson’s chief adviser, Mama Rosa, a consummate entrepreneur-artisan who helped promote global sales of textile products. D’Amico’s description of how this works is a convincing portrayal of what she calls “interactive interculturalism,” spearheaded by Parsons, who analyzed the transcultural practices of Otavalans that permitted a selective appropriation of globalized phenomena. This interactive interculturalism now allows Ecuador to move forward in a globalizing world as “an island of peace” in contrast with neighboring Venezuela and Colombia.

According to D’Amico, it was Parsons’s feminist methodology that cultivated attention to the intersubjective relations in everyday life that demonstrate the effectiveness of face-to-face social exchange. Building upon reciprocal exchanges in which women trace the networks linking them with members within and beyond their human group, Otavalan women extended their commercial ties transnationally. D’Amico further credits Parsons with her innovative methods of studying interactive interculturalism. Her focus on human values derived from lived experiences stems from daily practices that embody a cultural logic and are the

building blocks of identity (18). Ethnographically this can be decoded in the daily interactions in the family and community, a field site that was explored by women as they increased their presence in the discipline of anthropology.

Relying on experiential practices in her ethnographic descriptions, D'Amico allows her readers to enter into the affect as well as meaning of the behavior she describes ethnographically. As D'Amico sagely points out, Mama Rosa's claim to have opened up global commerce in Ecuador is not overinflated: she was a friend and consultant to Galo Plaza, the president of Ecuador in 1948 and ambassador to the United States from 1944 to 1946. She was invited to the Madrid celebration of the four hundred years since the arrival of Spain in the Americas, and to the New York World Fair in 1964. She helped transform thinking about *indigenismo* from a "rescue of passive victims through assimilation so that Indians would not be an obstacle to progress" to considering them the basis for an affluent society (52).

The self-confidence expressively demonstrated by Mama Rosa but also evident in her compatriots is embedded in their unity with Pachamama, the time-space continuum that is characteristic of Andean cosmological conceptions. Seen through Rosa's eyes, the mountains are witnesses of people's struggles and beliefs as they reconstitute religion in novel ways, enabling her to come to grips with difficult situations in her life. They provide a moral tale, "an archive of their history," D'Amico asserts (71), "that functions like an ecosystem, where human interaction with the environment and the supernatural are on a par" (79). This strength, derived from conscientious relation to the environment, conduces toward healthy households, D'Amico maintains, that contrast with Cartesian approaches stressing cerebral detachment.<sup>1</sup>

In her epilogue, D'Amico acquaints herself with Otavalans who have shown up in Spanish, US, and other First World artisan shows, where she finds that their cultural ingenuity allows them to engage in these distinct economies without losing their bearing. As they engage in selling their unique artisan products in far distant settings, the communities, united by a collective cultural ethos, continue to survive and keep alive their own customs.

D'Amico's book, with its attention to Mama Rosa, pairs well with *The Journey of a Tzotzil-Maya Woman of Chiapas, Mexico*, for which Christine Eber and "Antonia" share authorship. Here Eber has followed up her work since 1986 on human rights, artisan production, and the impact of alcohol in Chiapas with an extended dialogue with Antonia, one of her chief consultants. In repeated visits with Antonia and her husband, Domingo, Eber has grown closer to the family, which now has six children and grandchildren. Eber also has been instrumental in a cooperative based in her college community in Las Cruces, New Mexico, which extends the market for artisanal weaving that has supplemented the diminishing returns from the subsistence agricultural economy during her three decades of work.

Eber uses an autobiographical approach with her collaborator, Antonia; this approach enabled earlier ethnologists to avoid the authoritative stance of ethnographer vis-à-vis informant, as this information is woven into the ongoing nar-

1. Corroborating evidence from Andean sites with very distinct economies such as the Bolivian tin mines resonates in my reading of the Otavalans.

rative of their interaction. The result is a readable text that is at the same time more deeply contextualized in the eliciting context than that which characterized formal “scientific” texts in the past. Antonia’s narrative is not typical of autobiographies in the strict sense of a chronological unfolding of a life, punctuated with significant events. It is more like a dialogue, stimulated by prompts from Eber and involving contemporary reflections with past events. Eber’s role is to introduce the prompts that inspire the discourse and to set the context of what transpired in the community of Chenalhó, the Tzotzil municipality in which Antonia’s small household settlement, surrounded by cornfields, is located.

Antonia, like all the women in her community, is a weaver who has perforce become an entrepreneur in local cooperatives as well as in the cooperative that Eber organized in her New Mexican community. She is also a leader of a Catholic group influenced by liberation theology called Word of God, which was formed by Bishop Samuel Ruiz in the highland indigenous communities of Chiapas. Both narrator and anthropologist undertook the project of writing the narrative because of their desire to promote peace with justice in a state that, until the organization of the indigenous rights movement began in the 1970s, suffered from marginalization by a mestizo government that persisted far longer in Chiapas than in northern states of Mexico.

Like Otavalans, the women of Chenalhó suffer marginalization as women, but they lack the sisterhood that enables Otavalan women to publicly assert their rights within the home and in public. Antonia was determined to break through the patriarchy that restricted girls in indigenous communities even more than in mestizo culture. She had the support of her parents in gaining an education and the language skills necessary for a public life but felt compelled to marry and endure almost unrestricted childbearing. Despite the difficult living conditions in the rural hamlet of Polhó—hauling water from a distant stream, assisting in corn cultivation, and grinding maize without any public mill available—none of her six children died in infancy as is so common in rural Mexico. Her first victory was to assist her husband in overcoming his drinking problem. Her next challenge was to organize the women’s weaving cooperative, Tsobol Antzetic (Women United). And finally, she chose to become a Zapatista along with her husband when the uprising of 1994 mobilized indigenous women and men throughout the highlands of Chiapas.

Undertaking these challenges was daunting, especially when her children were young. She encountered the envy as well as the enmity of women and even her husband and other family members in her attempts to promote solidarity with global visitors who came from throughout the world to join in the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, EZLN). Because of her husband’s repeated illness, she was forced to earn some money. Working in the government educational programs for women and in the women’s cooperative, translating tapes and teaching Spanish, she earned wages that were even more exploitative than those for indigenous men. She is frank in relaying her misgivings about cultural traditions, adhering to those “that didn’t take much effort” (53) and “scramble” (as Mama Rosa would say) the two worlds she lived in. With her growing self-confidence she devised more adventurous efforts, setting

up a store in which she sold used clothing and homemade food products, which was beneficial for her neighbors as well as for her family.

Antonia's gradual process of self-liberation is a revelatory tale of the tortuous and often uncelebrated liberation of women in a doubly marginalized life. Antonia championed the Women's Clandestine Revolutionary Council and its statement of demands announced twelve days after the EZLN uprising on January 1, 1994. These included novel claims never before uttered by a revolutionary army, including those rejecting forced marriages, requisite child bearing, the ban against women voting or holding office, seclusion in the house, and other "customs and usages." Eber's faithful recording and translation of Antonia's narrative allows her to convey in simple and often poetic ways a triumphant life that will encourage other women to expand the boundaries of their destiny.

This chronicle by Eber and Antonia is part of the feminist tradition that is advanced in their sensitive rendition of a life devoted to family and community while transcending defined boundaries. Two decades ago there was no language to express the remarkable victories these women accomplished. The University of Texas Press has enhanced the text with many photographs taken by Eber, and the cover design includes leitmotifs of Tzotzil textiles.

Andrew Canessa's study *Intimate Indigenities: Race, Sex, and History in the Small Spaces of Andean Life* is part of the Duke University Press series *Narrating Native Histories*, which aims "to foster rethinking of ethical, methodological and conceptual frameworks within which we locate our work on Native histories and culture." Given this objective, Canessa's choice of Wila Kjarka in northern Bolivia is felicitous. Because of its remoteness from roads to urban populations and its lack of communication, it was possible to capture in an extended field study the rapid changes following the success of the rural peoples' movement. The movement that began throughout Bolivia called the "water war" precipitated revolutionary changes that became patently visible in the period of twenty years in which Canessa was carrying out fieldwork. The village had become accessible to urban areas with a highway and buses, which connected villagers socially and politically in a multicultural nation. By the time of his most recent visits in the third millennium, Canessa was able to see transformations that few places show in two or more generations.

Canessa addresses his leading question, what it means to be indigenous, in its manifestations in the "small spaces" of life. As all three of these books demonstrate, the dramatic rise of indigenous consciousness and movements to overcome the marginalization that indigenous peoples have experienced in the five hundred years of conquest and colonization were highly contested. The particular histories of each region, including the religion, occupational class, and geographical access to urban areas, influence the outcome in each setting in ways that Canessa finds highly contingent. In Wila Kjarka, people speak of themselves as *jaqi* (proper people). This is akin to the self-identification of indigenous people in Chiapas as *batz'il winiq*, which most anthropologists there translate as "true person." *Jaqi* is a term of identification that is "fluid, historically contingent, and arbitrary," according to Canessa (5). While there is no stable binary for the Indian/white dichotomy,

as Canessa reminds us, there is a powerful dynamic of racism in which the terms are used and ethnicity is expressed in language, dress, and behavior.

Canessa chooses to analyze the meaning of ethnicity in intimate social interactions since it is there that one can examine what he says is “the process in which identities are formed and articulated on a day-to-day level always relational to place” (25). This is an excellent way of emphasizing ethnographic methodology that, at its best, has always tried to capture the syndrome of beliefs and behaviors that animate cultural complexes. It is especially important to rescue this empirical analysis of everyday practices in the study of societies such as Wila Kjarca, Canessa notes, since they still differ profoundly from Western conceptions that tend to root identities related to race, gender, and ethnicity in the body (25–28). He also makes it very clear that the connection of their history as a people and as individuals is tied to the spectacular landscape in which they are portrayed in photographs that enhance the message. Contemporary figures are rooted in this past with the ancestors who are buried there and with whom they communicate. Since the validation of indigenous claims to primordial rights in the lands and resources they inhabit is based on such claims, it is possible to build legal cases to substantiate such claims with the kind of evidence Canessa provides.

Autobiographies are important sources to resolve the kinds of issues raised in the examination of the intimate spaces of life. For example, Canessa raises an interesting point in the introduction suggesting that the emergence of indigeneity in social movements in the 1990s is in part the failure of class movements in the 1970s and 1980s. This certainly applies to Bolivia, where the dramatic demobilization of the nationalized mines in 1985 and 1986 fragmented the labor movement predicated on tin mining. The reflections of Félix Muruchi (whose autobiography was edited by Benjamin Kohl and Linda Farthing in 2011), a man who worked in abandoned mines as a youth and later as a community activist in El Alto (the satellite city of La Paz), corroborate this transformation in his own lifetime.<sup>2</sup> Imprisoned for his union activities, he escaped into exile in Holland, where he attended university classes. He recounts his rejection of his indigenous roots while taking on the class struggle, then reawakening to his identification during his sojourn abroad, ultimately returning to his country to do community work in El Alto. In this burgeoning satellite city of La Paz, where rural cultivators who had lost their lands were scrambled together with miners discharged from the mines that were closed, new social movements emerged in the aftermath of the diaspora from the mines. Those miners who relocated in the agricultural hinterlands of the Chapare and Yungas, especially the coca cultivators, became the rank and file and in some instances leaders in the Movement to Socialism (Movimiento al Socialismo, MAS), which backed the presidency of Evo Morales.<sup>3</sup>

2. Benjamin Kohl and Linda Farthing, *From the Mines to the Streets: A Bolivian Activist's Life* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011).

3. I suspected when the MAS government came to power in 2006 that many of the miners who went to the jungles of Chapare and Yungas must have been a strong organizing force in the ranks of the coca growers. This is partially vindicated in the autobiography of Filemón Escobar. Escobar was a major leader of the Partido Obrero Revolucionario of the Federación de Sindicatos de Trabajadores

Canessa follows up his description of how identities are produced iteratively through action with observations of how people of Wila Kjarka make choices for change in their lives. With the enormous changes implicit in the election of an indigenous leader as president of Bolivia, people are caught in a time lag as they try to find inclusion and change in their own lives. Reminding the reader of the obstacles cast by existing power structures, Canessa opens up for analysis the aspects of desire and sex in relation to race and power. Here he turns to “the intimate spaces where race, sex and indigeneity are experienced, imagined, and developed . . . the better to explore the broadly global questions of power” (32). This vortex of “individual meanings, emotive forces, and bodily practices” that he calls “an ethnic kaleidoscope” is rarely put under a microscope or considered as a site for participant observation. Canessa explores it in ethnographies in Latin America, in its commercialized ventures such as beauty contests, and in public displays during Carnival.

What emerges in Canessa’s description of ethnicity in Wila Kjarka is the instability of indices along with possibilities for negotiating individual locations in the kaleidoscope of ethnic variation. Clothing provides a broad spectrum for national ethnic differences, in contrast to both the community specificity of *batz’il winik* in Chiapas described by Eber and the Otavalan regional indigenous vestments described by D’Amico. Religious commitment to Christianity is a general sense of the deity and his intermediary as presiding over the cosmos, with the forces defining daily life coming from below in the earth. The ancestors, or *achachilas*, who once predominated as advisers in communication with the people, seem to have lost their unifying force in the interim between Canessa’s first visits and his recent trips. The Pachamama, or time and place progenitor, is pan-Andean and as a spiritual orientation remains the most steadfast in the chthonic pantheon of rural Andean people; probably for this reason it was selected for reference by Evo Morales in the early part of his presidency.

Historical memory is equally evanescent as a unifying principle in Wila Kjarka, except for those under the age of thirty, although Canessa notes that such historical consciousness might kick in later. This contrasts with Bolivian miners, who were united in twentieth-century national history as the most dynamic sector of industrialization. The major gain for rural Indians in the 1952 Revolution was in the land reform achieved in the 1953 Constitution. With the 2006 revolution marked by the election of Evo Morales, the first Indian president in Bolivia and the first culturally identified Indian president in the continent to become president (Mexico’s president Benito Juárez was raised as an acculturated mestizo), the rural sector began to identify politically as indigenous. Canessa analyzes how national events entered into and motivated political formation in the region of Wila Kjarka. Given that indigenous people are the majority in Bolivia, identification

---

Mineros de Bolivia in the turbulent days of the 1950s to the 1980s. Reflecting on his turn to embracing the Pachakuti and the celebration of earth and time, he indicates that he wished to unite the growing movement of cultivators within the Center of Bolivian Workers which he also headed, but was rebuffed by the emergent leadership of the MAS. Clearly the autobiographies of such leaders could clarify ethnographic studies of communities.

as indigenous was far less central to the revolution that brought an indigenous president to power than in Chiapas during the Zapatista uprising.

#### CONCLUSIONS

What is clearly demonstrated in the books reviewed here is the orientation of the indigenous people to world organizations in the three national settings. Canessa spells this out, pointing to the significance of the International Labour Organization's Convention 169 declaring the rights of indigenous people to their distinctive culture in education and governance. The convention has expanded the base for demands related to land and resources as indigenous people in the Americas become accustomed to living in a multicultural setting. Through this they are prepared for coexistence in a globalizing world, where people of distinct languages and customs coexist within nations that had asserted homogeneity as a norm. Whether the political and economic rights agreed upon in United Nations covenants will continue to influence indigenous mobilizations depends on grass-roots levels of organization in places like Otavalo, Chiapas, and Wila Kjarka. Anthropological studies of the local will advance political understanding of national and international organizations as they continue to illuminate alternative ways of organizing in a global setting. The close attention to interpersonal connections that is advanced in these monographs as the hallmark of ethnographic methodology will become an ever more important contribution to global studies.