Discovering & Reconnecting to an Ancient Culture: An Interview with Bianet Castellanos

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Beginning in high school, Bianet Castellanos had an interest in the history and the culture of the indigenous people of Mexico. That particular history wasn’t easy to explore.

Growing up in San Joaquin Valley of California, all she learned about Latinos in history was the Mexican American War and the conquest of the Aztecs, Maya (http://www.history.com/topics/maya), and Incas. And that’s all she could find in the library.
As an undergrad, she became interested in the art of the indigenous people of Mexico. But art history seemed to focus on European traditions and there too, she found very little written about Mexico and South America. Her instructors focused on the Renaissance. “That wasn’t what I was passionate about.”

Professors at Stanford convinced her to study anthropology, instead of art history. And that was the beginning of a journey eventually leading her to a position as an anthropologist and core faculty member in the American Studies department (http://americanstudies.umn.edu/), focusing on indigenous communities in the Americas.

Castellanos began by spending months learning the Mayan language at Stanford, followed by spending her summers working with a Maya community in Yucatán. She smiles as she recalls discovering years later, there was a large community of Yucatán Mayans much closer to home, in San Francisco. She needn’t have traveled to Mexico to learn the language.

“This story is just one of the interesting ways in which we imagine indigenous people to be rooted in one particular place because that’s where they’re from. But we forget there are also diasporas.”

Castellanos still travels to Mexico and has spent over 20 years working with the same communities and developing relationships there. She also works with Maya immigrants in Los Angeles. Among other insights, studying both groups allows her to explore “how race is constructed across time and space.”

Racial systems in the United States are very different from those in Latin America and Mexico. The experience of being indigenous gets reconfigured in the U.S. as indigenous migrants settle into this space. “When they are defined as Mexican or Latino, their history as indigenous peoples is erased.” Castellanos has found that for “indigenous people in the U.S., race impacts their lives in subtle but significant ways.”

Race in the U.S. is based on blood quantum. You’re defined as indigenous mostly based on how much blood you have, your bloodline. Castellanos explains that in Mexico indigeneity is based on language. If you are 5 years or older and speak an indigenous language, then you are classified as indigenous.

Informally in Mexico, race is also determined by your phenotype, your dress, and where you live. “In Yucatán, how you dress can determine whether you are defined as indigenous or not.” So in coming here, indigenous people are exposed to very different ideas about race and its impact on their lives.

“These ideas do not easily translate across cultures.” Castellanos had to find “basically new vocabularies – and I’m not talking about just words,” in order to tease out how race is understood in Mexico and in the United States.”

“Excavating that history is really important for Mayans migrants and their children to feel that they are valued.” Castellanos’ work helps them do that.

When asked to consider the future of her work, the political climate comes sharply to the front. It won’t just affect her work. Castellanos is also deeply concerned for the well-being of the communities she is working with, both in this country and in Mexico.

“If Mexico pulls out of NAFTA, that’s going to have repercussions for all Mexicans, especially for indigenous communities, because they … have the fewest resources available to them.”

“Most of the people I work with are in the service industry and tourism. If there is any kind of impact on tourism, it affects how they can feed their children. So you can see the repercussions of the United States government’s stand against Mexico, how that’s going to affect people in their daily lives.”

She’s also concerned about the Maya migrant community in Los Angeles due to the political climate against immigration. Some of them are documented, but some are undocumented. Changing policies will have a huge impact on these communities.

“You have a lot of families that are mixed status, where somebody has their green card or is a citizen but other family members do not.” Sometimes the kids are citizens and the parents are not.

Just like other immigrants throughout history, migrants come to the United States for a better life. Some are escaping violence due to sexual orientation, or other dangerous situations. It’s complicated, but Castellanos feels “the policies that are being proposed don’t take into consideration those issues at all. The translation is that they end up harming a lot of people and creating a lot of structural violence.”

“A lot of these folks are just living at the margins. What are the lasting, generational implications for families who are living in an already precarious status and then having to undergo these experiences and shifts in policies?”
“In the media people are talking about how these protestors are politically motivated. Yes, they are politically motivated but not because it’s a Democrat or a Republican, but because these policies are going to affect people’s lives. These are not just protests for protest’s sake. People are protesting who have never protested before because fundamental rights are at stake.”

“So this is the kind of work we need to be moving forward with – it’s important. There are some of us doing it, but we need more support for more of us to do it.”

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