



Engaging Comunalidad as Theory and Praxis in Language Reclamation

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Abstract

Comunalidad is the result of struggle and collective reflection emerging from the daily resistance and lived experiences of Indigenous peoples in the Sierra Norte of Oaxaca, Mexico (Maldonado, 2010). Like comunalidad, language reclamation is inherently relational and dynamic, deeply connected to identity, autonomy, and self-determination. In this essay, I explore comunalidad as theory, praxis, and pedagogy asking: How might comunalidad, as a relational and situated praxis, inform efforts toward language revitalization? Understanding the foundations and contextual factors that give rise to comunalidad is necessary to illuminate its intersections with and implications for language reclamation. I argue that comunalidad prompts us to conceive of language reclamation as a collective purpose—one that arises from, informs, and strengthens community relational practices and processes. As theory, comunalidad informs language reclamation; as praxis, it actively shapes both language and the process of reclaiming it. In this way, comunalidad emphasizes the need for situated pedagogies rooted in the daily praxis of the community. Overall, a lens of comunalidad provides insight into how language reclamation can function as a collective process and responsibility, building and strengthening community relationality, self-determination, and resistance.

Keywords: comunalidad, decolonization, indigenous language revitalization, language reclamation, indigenous education, Latin America

Introduction

Comunalidad is a product of processes of struggle and collective reflection that emerged, not within the hegemonic spaces of academia, but in the daily struggle and resistance of Indigenous peoples of the Sierra Norte of Oaxaca, Mexico, against the dispossession of their lands and in defense of their right to self-determination (Maldonado, 2010a). Described as “the principle and practices of communal life and the source of indigenous identity and resistance” (Meyer, 2010, p. 30-31), comunalidad emerges as an ideology of conscientization that seeks to “orient the life of pueblos as pueblos,” to uncover the effects of colonialism and the dominant culture so they could be reverted (Maldonado, 2010a, p.46).

Without losing sight of comunalidad as being grounded, created and re-created in the everyday labor of society (Martínez Luna, 2013), using it as theory represents a political act, and as Nava Morales (2013) asserts, a decolonizing move that places it in the analytical horizon with other decolonizing theories in Latin America, reinforcing the ethno-political struggles of Indigenous peoples. In this spirit, this essay explores comunalidad as theory, praxis and pedagogy, focusing on its intersections and possibilities with and for language reclamation in Oaxaca and similar contexts of colonization and struggle for self-determination.

Most of the literature on comunalidad has emerged from the Oaxacan context and has been applied locally to grassroots initiatives that aim to transform an Indigenous education that is articulated around local knowledges and grounded on participation in and by the community (Briseño, 2013; Maldonado, 2016). These proposals resonate deeply with the concept and praxis of language reclamation. Introduced by Leonard (2012) as an alternate term for language revitalization, language reclamation encompasses familiar strategies intended to address the disruptions in cultural and linguistic intergenerational transmission, including language documentation, description and language learning. However, language reclamation offers a broader perspective, emphasizing the embodied and dynamic nature of language and its inseparable and reciprocal connections to human and more-than-human interaction. Language reclamation is never only about the language. It is relational, connected to autonomy, self-determination, and a sense of identity for communities and individuals (Hinton, 2001; Smith, 2012). Consequently, language reclamation initiatives cannot merely replicate dominant second language education practices and pedagogies and, as Hermes, Bang and Marin (2012) put it, need to be “part and parcel of building relationships and community health” (p.162).

The organizational structures of comunalidad, and the embedded relationality within comunalidad provide an important foundation, a framework and a platform from which to reclaim the many Indigenous languages within the state of Oaxaca. It also holds deep promise to help move the field and praxis of language revitalization in ethical ways that are consistent with its relational values. To achieve this vision, a clear understanding about the foundations and contextual factors that give rise to comunalidad is needed, as it can illuminate the ways that such a framework can inform and help deepen understanding and practices of language revitalization and reclamation. With this in mind, I ask: What is comunalidad? And how might comunalidad inform efforts toward language revitalization?

I argue that comunalidad offers a framework for considering the distinct principles, practices and processes in the communities where we work, prompting us to conceive of language reclamation as a collective purpose that arises from, informs and strengthens community relational practices and processes.

This essay starts with a brief background on Oaxaca and my positionality as a scholar engaging with Indigenous ways of knowing. I then trace comunalidad within the broader historical,

sociolinguistic and political context of Oaxaca, followed by a description of different educational initiatives and how they have envisioned a pedagogy grounded on *comunalidad*. The paper ends with a discussion on the relationship between language and *comunalidad* and the possibilities of engaging *comunalidad* in and for language reclamation.

Background

As a woman of mixed Mexican, Spanish and German heritage with broken ties to indigeneity, my interest in *comunalidad* arises from a yearning to respond to the many ways that my own histories carry colonial burdens. It is a commitment to interrupt genealogies of violence, forge situated solidarities (Nagar, 2014) and strive towards reclaiming Indigenous ways of knowing and being—nurturing relationality with community and with the Land.

My doctoral dissertation research took me to Oaxaca City, where I taught a class at a language teacher education program aimed to nurture and create spaces for Indigenous languages through critical embodied pedagogies (Schwedhelm Ramirez, 2022). Committed to countering linguistic and epistemicide by grounding language reclamation on Indigenous knowledges and approaches (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005; Simpson, 2018), I encouraged my class to explore their/our inherited ancestral knowledges, learning from their/our lived experiences and engaging with their/our parents, grandparents and communities. In other words, students participated in their communities, reclaiming their languages alongside their parents and grandparents, and brought that knowledge—and *comunalidad*—back into our classroom through storytelling.

I was acquainted with *comunalidad* as a way of being in the world through friends and mentors before delving into the literature. Between 2016 and 2018, I had the opportunity to learn Mixtec from Dr. Juan Julián Caballero and later, Maestra Angelina Trujillo in Ixpantepec Nieves. Their teachings on each concept, phrase or metaphor were also teachings into the ways of living and knowing in their communities. Over the years, I have also learned much from colleagues, students and friends and from witnessing different manifestations of *comunalidad* in the festivities and ways of taking over the streets in celebration and in struggle.

Oaxaca is Mexico's linguistically and culturally most diverse state: 16 distinct languages are recognized by the Instituto Nacional Indigenista (INI), and close to a third of the population identifies as a speaker of an Indigenous language (INEGI, 2020).

The communities referred to by *comunalistas* are usually isolated and under five thousand people. Most base their livelihood on the farming of milpa, a triad of corn, beans and squash. It is within these communities that *comunalidad* has developed over thousands of years. Perhaps because of its rich cultural, linguistic and natural diversity, Oaxaca is also characterized by a history of struggle and political resistance against neoliberal interests and policies that have seized land and natural resources and aimed to Spanishize or shift to Spanish, the national language, and assimilate Indigenous communities to the nation-state in the name of 'progress.' The changes created by a neoliberal economy and assimilationist policies have profoundly affected communities in Oaxaca, resulting in societal changes that have disrupted cultural and linguistic intergenerational transmission (de León, 2017). Many communities continue to transmit their language to the younger generations, but others have shifted to Spanish or are in the process of shifting (de León, 2017; Hamel, 2008). Yet where there has been language shift, *comunalidad* remains. Many communities that have shifted to Spanish still retain strong elements of *comunalidad* (Maldonado, 2010a). To illustrate, while 31% of the population in Oaxaca identifies as a speaker of an Indigenous language (INEGI, 2020), 418 of the 560

municipalities are organized politically through “usos y costumbres, local processes of decision-making rooted in *comunalidad*” (Martínez Luna, 2013).

Zapotec is the most widely spoken language, with over 420,000 speakers (INEGI, 2020) and more than 60 variants. Some languages and/or dialectal varieties in Oaxaca are being rapidly displaced, while others have larger numbers of speakers and long history of activism and political support (Brügmann & Acevedo, 2013). Ayuujk or Mixe, another language spoken in the state, is spoken by around 118,000 people (INEGI, 2020) in the Sierra Norte, an area that borders and intertwines with Zapotec languages and communities. Renowned as one of the most vibrant languages in the state, Ayuujk owes its vitality to a geopolitical delimitation and collective identification which have fostered resistance strategies through *comunalidad* (Brügmann & Acevedo, 2013).

Methods

This essay employs a narrative review approach (Creswell, 2012) to explore the concept of *comunalidad* and its potential to inform language revitalization practices. The narrative review method is well-suited to address the research questions, “What is *comunalidad*?” and “How might *comunalidad* inform efforts toward language revitalization?” because it allows for a flexible and comprehensive examination of scholarly and community-based sources.

To address the first research question, “What is *comunalidad*?”, I reviewed foundational texts, beginning with Maldonado Alvarado (2010a, 2010b), which led me to the works of Floriberto Díaz (2007), Jaime Martínez Luna (2013), and Rendón Monzón (2003). These texts provide a comprehensive overview of the origins, cultural context, and key pillars of *comunalidad*. To broaden the scope, I conducted keyword searches for “*comunalidad*,” “*educación comunitaria*,” and “*education and language revitalization*” in both English and Spanish on platforms like Google Scholar, Scielo, and Redalyc. This approach enabled a broad exploration of the diverse perspectives and contexts surrounding *comunalidad*, particularly those relevant to education and community practices.

For the second research question, “How might *comunalidad* inform efforts toward language revitalization?”, I analyzed the application of *comunalidad* principles to educational and language reclamation efforts, drawing from both the literature and my personal experiences as a student and educator in Oaxaca.

In summary, this methodology—combining a narrative literature review with an experiential analysis—aims to comprehensively address the research questions by providing both a theoretical foundation and practical examples of *comunalidad* in the context of language revitalization.

Literature Overview

While much has been written about *comunalidad* since the 1980s, it has been mostly situated within the Oaxacan context through a group of authors, including Floriberto Díaz, Jamine Martínez Luna, Benjamín Maldonado, Joel Aquino, Adelfo Regino, Gustavo Esteba, Alajandra Aquino Moreschi and Arturo Guerrero Osorio, who are sometimes referred to as *comunalistas* (Maldonado, 2010a). Its first intellectuals were two anthropologists and political activists, Jaime Martínez Luna, Zapotec from Guelatao and Floriberto Díaz, Ayuujk from Santa María Tlahitoltepec, who conceptualized *comunalidad* as “the explanatory concept of the organizational modalities of Oaxacan society” (Martínez Luna, 2010, p.89) and “the element that defines the immanence of the community,” (Díaz, 2007). Since the 1980s many scholars have added their reflections on *comunalidad*. Rendón (2003), through collective analytical processes in Oaxacan communities, arrived at a conceptualization of *comunalidad* as a flower composed of four fundamental pillars: *territorio* (land), *trabajo* (work), *poder*

(power) and *fiesta comunales* (community festivities). Others (e.g. Aquino Moreschi, 2013; Guerrero Osorio, 2013; Nava Morales, 2013) have also developed *comunalidad* as an analytical theory, putting it in conversation with decolonial and anthropological theories.

Within the field of education, Benjamín Maldonado (2010a; 2010b; 2016) has been an important contributor to *comunalidad* as theory and practice, actively developing, promoting and describing alternative education efforts that have applied *comunalidad* as a guiding principle. Lois Meyer, a US based applied linguist, has collaborated extensively with Maldonado and other educators and teacher-based organizations in the state of Oaxaca in the development of education programs, authoring and co-authoring most of the existing literature on *comunalidad* in English (e.g. Meyer & Maldonado, 2004; Meyer & Maldonado, 2010). Alongside Maldonado and Meyer, many others have published empirical studies that describe educational initiatives centered on *comunalidad* (e.g. Argüello Parra, 2016; Briseño, 2013; Ruiz López & Quiroz Lima, 2014). Most of the available literature and media that narrate, describe and analyze experiences of education for *comunalidad* are centered in spaces of “formal” schooling and focus on the importance of a holistic education grounded on Indigenous ways of being.

Origins and Meanings

Floriberto Díaz translated living energy of Ayuujk thinking into Spanish. The word “community,” or in Spanish, “comunidad,” and “comunal,” the adjective used to describe that which belongs to the community, is not an Indigenous word, but, as Díaz (2007) notes, is the one that “comes closer to what we want to say” (p.38).

In his Ayuujk language, the idea of *comunalidad* is described through two words, “*näjx*,” (earth/land) and “*käjp*,” (pueblo), making the interrelationship and interdependence of earth/land and pueblo evident. As he tells us, *näjx* makes the existence of *käjp* possible while *käjp* gives meaning to *näjx*. Beyond the idea of “community” as an aggregate of individuals coming together in a specific geographical location, the community that Floriberto Díaz and Jaime Martínez Luna show us is characterized by a web of relationships primarily between people and the environment and then among people themselves.

Martínez Luna (2010) writes that “*comunalidad* is a way of understanding life as being permeated with spirituality, symbolism, and a greater integration with nature. It is one way of understanding that human beings are not the center, but simply a part of this great natural world” (p.94). This being in relation with the natural world is fundamental to many Indigenous cultures and around the world (e.g., Bang et al., 2015; Simpson, 2018; Wilson, 2001) and integral to Indigenous methodologies (Kovach, 2015; Smith, 2012). In his community of Santa María Tlahuitoltepec, Floriberto Díaz describes these relationships as manifesting through an underlying force or energy that mediates between people and people with each element of nature (in Nava, 2013, p.60). Human beings, he says, “*entramos en relación con la Tierra de dos formas*,” enter in relationship with the Earth/Land in two ways, “*a través del trabajo en cuanto territorio, y a través de los ritos y ceremonias, en tanto a madre*,” through work as land/territory and through rites and ceremonies as mother (Díaz, 2007, p.41). This conception of Earth/land contrasts deeply with the modern, Western notion of “nation-state.”

The Elements of Comunalidad

Floriberto Díaz (2007) emphasized the dual relationship of people with the Earth/Land as mother and territory, noting that these two relationships are simultaneous. He foregrounded the spiritual connections with the land as underlying every relationship, including work. In fact, work constitutes

one of the main elements of *comunalidad*, both in relationship with the land, but also the value of donating work for the benefit of the community. Díaz described the following elements as being central to *comunalidad*:

La Tierra, como Madre y como territorio. El consenso en Asamblea para la toma de decisiones. El servicio gratuito, como ejercicio de autoridad. El trabajo colectivo, como un acto de recreación. Los ritos y ceremonias, como expresión del don comunal (p.40).

[Earth/Land as mother and territory. Consensus in assembly for decision-making. Free labor as exercise of authority. Collective work as an act of leisure. Rites and ceremonies as an expression of the communal gift].

Juan José Rendón (2003) distinguishes four main elements of *comunalidad*: Territorio communal (territory), poder comunal (governance), trabajo comunal (labor), and fiesta communal (enjoyment). These elements are considered to define Indigenous identity and form the basis of resistance (Maldonado, 2010a; Martínez Luna, 2010). While language is considered a marker of identity, Martínez Luna notes that it is not the only mechanism of resistance. The loss of language does not mean the loss of identity, then “even in Spanish,” he says, “we are resisting” (in Rendón, 2003, p.24). It is in the social organization, the communal work, and the community that lie the main mechanisms of resistance.

Other elements that help in the recreation of life in the community are considered by Rendón (2003) as “auxiliary.” These include Indigenous rights and values that regulate community life, traditional indigenous education (home), cosmovision (e.g. experiences, knowledges, myths), and language.

The four main elements are built on a strong social fabric that is weaved through relationships of reciprocity (Maldonado, 2010a). This social fabric starts with the interrelations in the family and the relations formed through *compadrazgo*, the extended family relationships formed through marriage, and other rituals that bind families together. Finally, the social fabric is weaved through wider relationships in the community and the practice of reciprocity that permeates life in the community. Reciprocity is a two-way relationship; it is inclusive, and as opposed to solidarity, which is temporary and reserved for times of difficulty, reciprocity is obligatorily permanent (Maldonado, 2010b). Let’s now turn to the main elements of *comunalidad* as a lens into the life in the community.

Territorio Comunal. Territorio comunal represents the land where the community is located and the relationships with the more-than-human world through the work in the milpa and other rituals and ceremonies. Prieto (in Maldonado, 2010a) tells a story told by Uncle Pablito from the Zapotec community of San Antonio el Alto that shows the two simultaneous relationships to Earth/Land as territorio and as mother. In the story, God tells Adam that he will have to work the land. But when Adam begins, the land resists—trembling and roaring. God then asks Adam what he has offered the land in return. When Adam replies that he has not offered anything, God tells him to offer himself and ask the land to let him live and sustain him, as he will sustain her with his body after death. Uncle Pablito explains that this is where the custom of offering began. Because we can’t offer our bodies until death, we make offerings as a thank you before and after each harvest as a promise of the final offer (p.52). This story illustrates the land both as territory, to be worked on for sustenance, and as a maternal and living presence with whom the community maintains a relationship of reciprocity.

Poder Comunal. Poder comunal is represented through the *asamblea* (assembly) and the *sistema de cargos* (unpaid work for the community). The *asamblea* is the maximum organ of authority in the community. It is in the *asamblea* that the most important decisions in the community are made through a consensus-building process that is usually in the native, or Indigenous language. Every time the authorities face a difficult decision, they need to call the *asamblea* and it is also in the *asamblea* that the authorities are named. This system of horizontal organization is set to avoid the concentration of power. Once someone is named to a *cargo* or position to serve the community, they have the responsibility to fulfill that *cargo*. All men, and in some communities also women start serving usually as *topiles* or security guards in the community (Maldonado, 2010a; Rendón, 2003). As people get older and fulfill different jobs, they might be elected to positions of authority, which can be both political and religious. It is through serving and working that power is given by the *asamblea*, as “it is through the work of organizing community work that the authority is realized and legitimized” (Guerrero Osorio, 2013, p.46).

Trabajo Comunal. Trabajo or *tequio* represents another type of unpaid work done for the benefit of the community, like building the access road or painting a public building. Some communities have obligatory *tequio* every Sunday, others make a call through the *topiles* or by ringing the church bell. When a call for *tequio* is made, everybody has the responsibility to attend or otherwise has to legitimize their absence. Belonging to the community carries the obligation to fulfill the responsibilities of *cargos* and *tequio*. Constantly failing to do so indicates a refusal to be part of the community and can result in the rejection and potential expulsion from the community (Maldonado, 2010a). The obligatory character of unpaid work, be it *tequio* or the *cargo* system, conserves the conditions that ensure the permanence of the collective. Fulfilling responsibilities as members of a community constantly reiterates the desire to belong to the community, but as much as it is an obligation, communal work is also joyful as it brings people together and celebrates the power of the collective to build something for the benefit of all.

Another type of unpaid work in the community is *guelaguetza*. It is mutual help between family, *compadres*, and friends during community events like agricultural labor, weddings, births, and funerals (Guerrero Osorio, 2013). The encounter and reciprocity through everyday *guelaguetza* represents both “ethics” and “esthetics.” As Osorio (2013) writes “[*Guelaguetza*] forms all relationships within the community recursively... generating new nexus and commitments, weaving people in the We, in powerful circuits of giving, respect and gratitude” (p.48).

Fiesta Comunal. Like the *guelaguetza*, la *fiesta* is a mechanism of social cohesion that is created and re-created through giving and receiving (Guerrero Osorio, 2013). A community celebrates many *fiestas* (festivities) each year, some of which last for several days. *Comunalidad* as an organizational structure comes particularly to light during times of *fiesta*. La *fiesta* is “where relationships between relatives and neighbors are best created, consolidated, repaired or broken.” New familiar relationships like *compadrazgos* are solidified, people fulfill work for the community, share *guelaguetzas* and take part in collective expressions of identity.

Comunalidad as Resistance

From a sociocultural perspective, “culture” can be conceptualized as a set of “cultural practices that show both stabilities and changes across generations” (Rogoff, 2003, p.11). From this definition, *comunalidad* can be viewed as culture. The cultural practices or what anthropologists call “patterns,” *comunalistas* would call “pillars,” *territorio* (land), *poder* (power), *trabajo* (power) and *fiesta* (festivities), the main elements of *comunalidad*. There might be many other patterns that are shared between different communities that practice *comunalidad*, such as the everyday participation of

children and youth in the community. Yet conceptualizing *comunalidad* as culture deprives *comunalidad* of its theoretical significance. There are power dynamics embedded in the term “culture,” with Indigenous ways of knowing being marginalized or devalued as “beliefs” or “cultural practices,” inferior to Western scientific knowledge. Several Indigenous scholars (Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008; Cajete, 2004) have addressed this marginalization as epistemic injustice, arguing that Indigenous science and knowledge systems are equally valuable and can offer unique insights. Viewing *comunalidad* as theory and praxis expands its significance and implications for research, education and resistance and contributes to fostering epistemic justice within academic and societal contexts.

Critics of *comunalidad* have accused its theorists of essentializing and painting an idyllic vision of an “authentic” past (see e.g. de la Cruz, 2011). But as Aquino Moreschi (2013) maintains, the *comunalistas* highlight not an origin or essence, but the organizational structures and processes that constantly create and re-create *comunalidad* and the sense of belonging to the community. Martínez Luna notes that anyone who is committed with communal life and contributes to the *asamblea*, *tequio* and *cargo* system can live and experience *comunalidad* (in Aquino Moreschi, 2013).

Comunalidad is conceived as the axis of resistance against colonial violence and globalizing processes, and in that sense also, it is always dynamic. Maldonado (2010) asserts that “if *comunalidad* is the key characteristic of life of Mesoamerican pueblos and they have continued being because they have resisted domination, then *comunalidad* has been the foundation of resistance” (2010, p.47). This everyday resistance can only be realized through constant re-production and re-creation.

Just as it is dynamic, *comunalidad* is paradox and contradiction. Martínez Luna recognizes that *comunalidad* originates through the history of oppression and domination that the Indigenous peoples have been submitted to, and in that sense, it too is a product of colonial history (2010). This affirmation, Aquino Moreschi (2013) notes, helps to break away from interpretations that seek an “authentic” prehispanic past or “legitimate” cultural practices (p.9). It also resonates with reminders from decolonial scholars that we cannot exist outside of modernity (e.g. Lugones, 2010).

The challenges posed by modernity are many, with individualism being the biggest threat because it fractures the community. It enters communities through Protestantism that disrupts community values and practices, political parties that disrupt self-governance through *asambleas* and the neoliberal economy, closely tied to migration out of the community (Aquino Moreschi, 2013; Maldonado, 2010a). Contradictions, Martínez Luna notes, “are a daily occurrence, not only of individuals, but also of communities.

Guerrero Osorio (2013) describes the paradox of *comunalidad* as consisting of “the conservation of itself by changing, changing to remain and endure; primordial adaptation between conserving and creating; endless renewal of what does not change” (in Esteva, 2016, p.181). He very aptly conceptualizes *comunalidad* as a spiral, a whirlpool that exists within the river of capitalism, swirling and being formed by the outside flow, yet also existing independently through a relatively stable flow against it. This whirlpool spins from the root (the spiritual connection to the Land, “that turn where the earth becomes territorio”) and it is realized through the diverse, but unifying, always generative collective values and communal practices.

Comunalidad and Education

So far, I have traced the organizational structures of *comunalidad* and how it manifests itself as a dynamic spiral of everyday resistance. In this section, I describe educational experiences that center *comunalidad* at the heart of the curriculum, focusing on the role that they place on language. I offer these examples to illustrate the different ways that *comunalidad* has been conceptualized and has taken

root in these alternative education efforts to then turn our attention to the possibilities of these political-pedagogical foundations, and of *comunalidad* as a guiding principle for language reclamation.

Comunalidad as Resistance in Education

The goal of the federal Indigenous Education Program in Mexico has always been linguistic and cultural homogenization (Jiménez Naranjo, 2009). Floriberto Díaz (2007) describes the following grievances and demands voiced during an *asamblea* in Totontepec in 1979:

La escuela desarraiga, hace flojos a nuestros hijos, se olvidan de nuestra lengua, pues solo se enseña el castellano, se combaten nuestras costumbres.

Nosotros deseamos que los niños no olviden lo que les enseñamos en el hogar... (p.286).

[The school uproots, makes our children lazy, they forget our language, because only Spanish is taught, our customs are combated.

We wish for the children not to forget what we teach them at home ...]

Almost 40 years later, those grievances and demands still resonate. The path to resolve them has been long, but advances have been made through the grassroots efforts of many people who have dedicated their work to the Indigenous movement.

One of the most notable examples of resistance in Mexico is the rise of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) in 1994, which significantly influenced linguistic ideologies and language policies by shifting from top-down, state-initiated policies to a “more diverse mix of independent and grassroots processes generated ‘from within and below’” (de León, 2017, p. 415). This shift also impacted education in Oaxaca, where in 1995, *comunalidad* was adopted as the fourth guiding principle of education. This principle emphasized that *comunalidad* should be “integrally implemented so that in future generations, it becomes the foundational knowledge and the basis of constructing all other knowledge” (Martínez Luna, 2010, p. 85).

Significant grassroots Indigenous education initiatives emerged in Oaxaca as part of this movement, driven by Indigenous intellectuals like Floriberto Díaz. Simultaneously, the Coalition of Indigenous Teachers and Promoters of Oaxaca (CMPIO) advocated for culturally relevant education models (Maldonado, 2016). *Comunal* education gained further traction with the implementation of the PTEO (Plan de Transformación de la Educación de Oaxaca), an alternative education proposal developed by the Instituto Estatal para la Educación Pública de Oaxaca (IEEPO) in collaboration with the Sección 22 teachers' union. The PTEO, grounded in a critical *comunal* intercultural framework, aims to revitalize and strengthen Indigenous languages and *comunal* knowledge by fostering strong connections between communities, schools, and the personal development of students (Maldonado & Maldonado, 2018; PTEO, 2013; Ramos, 2012).

The political context continuously shapes *comunalidad* as a counter-hegemonic effort from a pedagogical front (Maldonado & Maldonado, 2018). While language reclamation is always a form of decolonization, (Hinton et al., 2018), the political struggles centered around education and the predominant role that indigenous teachers and communities have played within the resistance, make the relationship between language reclamation and decolonization especially salient in the Oaxacan context.

Grassroots Initiatives

As a response to the grievances about the state of education voiced during the *asambleas comunitarias*, Floriberto Díaz (2007) presents “our ideas for an integral Mixe education,” which he presents as follows:

El contenido del proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje debe basarse en el amor a la tierra en donde hemos nacido y que nos han heredado nuestros antepasados; en la vida en comunidad como forma manifiesta de nuestra igualdad social, y en el tequio que nos garantiza armonizar nuestras fuerzas humanas con las de la naturaleza y nos permite asegurar la construcción conjunta de nuestro futuro como individuos, como pueblo, como ciudadanos de un país y de un mundo civilizado (p.296).

[The content of the teaching-learning process needs to be based on the love of the land where we were born and that we have inherited from our ancestors; in life in the community as a manifest form of our social equality, and on the tequio, that guarantees us to harmonize our human forces with those of nature and allows us to secure the joint construction of our future as individuals, as pueblo, as citizens of a country and a civilized world].

Educational proposals that emerge in community *asambleas* recognize the need to build a model of education that is pertinent to the communal context (Meyer, 2010). But while referred to as an educational model (e.g. Briseño, 2013), to be pertinent to the (ever changing) communal context, this “new pedagogy” must be necessarily dynamic and adaptable. As Martínez Luna (2010) notes, we cannot speak of one pedagogy when the aim of *comunalidad* is to liberate the exercise of knowledge. There are however shared characteristics that frame these educational proposals and that distinguish *educación comunitaria* from the hegemonic curriculum. Maldonado (2016) lists these characteristics as: 1) The articulation of knowledges around local and regional knowledges, 2) research as the pedagogical axis, 3) the communal philosophy as a horizon, 4) the participation of the community in the learning process, 5) the extensive use of the Indigenous language, 6) a curriculum suitable to the reality in which students and the community works, and 7) the collaboration of teachers, who, more than teach, help students learn (p.48).

According to Dietz (2012), *educación comunitaria* aims to achieve a dialogic education that combines and negotiates local forms of knowledge with external, colonizing models of education. It needs to be rooted in the community first, and from the cultural and linguistic matrix approach different ways of knowing.

The emphasis on research, learning through experience, and the integration between school and community in *educación comunitaria* echoes Dewey’s experience in education (1986), but it differs in important ways. *Educación comunitaria* is rooted in the community, and it emphasizes the collective, relationality with the land, and the responsibility of belonging and responding to *comunalidad* through *cargos*, *tequio* and *guelaguetza*. It also differs from other forms of experiential or project-based education in its political orientation. This critical perspective is reminiscent of Paulo Freire (2018) in that it seeks to raise awareness of unequal power relations and of McCarty and Lee’s (2014) critical culturally sustaining/revitalizing pedagogy in that it seeks to challenge these asymmetrical power relations while aiming to revitalize what has been lost.

Educación comunitaria also resonates with the Māori model of language Nests (King, 2001), which has been adopted into the Oaxacan context (Meyer, 2018) and put into practice in early education and in preschools in communities around the state. Lois Meyer (2018) describes a teacher education program in community-based initial education that aimed to enrich the communal

knowledge of teacher participants through a process of reflection and community-based research of local child-rearing practices. The goal was to collaborate with communities “on the creation of an authentic, alternative, bilingual, and community- appropriate Initial Education” (Meyer, 2018, p.94). As this example illustrates, education programs grounded on *comunalidad* exist in dialogue and conversation with other theories and experiences, including trans-Indigenous collaboration.

In preschools and at the elementary school level, schools operated by CMPIO through the PTEO have incorporated *comunalidad* as a guiding principle through project-based learning and bilingual education. Though few experiences have been documented, the Ikoots preschool in San Mateo del Mar has been mentioned as an example of successful practices in bilingual education (Maldonado & Madonado, 2018). One of the documented experiences has been that of the formative evaluation through the participation of the community in what is called a *guelaguetza pedagógica*. During this ritual of mutual giving, students from the local preschool perform and explain to the community a ritual-making of tortillas for ancestors in Huave, their Indigenous language (“Pedagogía,” 2014).

The *secundarias comunitarias* have been described as having “the most innovative and positive model of communal education in Oaxaca,” one that has served as model for the development of PTEO and other grassroots projects (Maldonado & Maldonado, 2018, n.p.). These schools follow a project and community-based research curriculum where students learn research skills in their first year and then go out to their communities to apply their knowledge and try to solve real problems. Students use their Indigenous language to interview elders in the community and to analyze the information gathered. Additionally, their findings are shared bilingually in community *asambleas* where everybody is invited and participates in the formative evaluation of the students’ work. Through this pedagogical process, the *secundaria comunitaria* promotes the use and importance of the Indigenous language while also leading students to re-value the local knowledges (Briseño, 2015; Ruiz López & Quiroz Lima, 2014). Many of them are published as bilingual texts, and also noteworthy is the actual impact that some of the projects have after being presented in the *asambleas*. A project on whitetail deer that was published as “El venado, ¿víctima o ser sobrenatural?” also resulted in the community banning the hunting of deer. A second project that investigated and reported on the level of pollution in the community resulted in plastic bags being forbidden in stores and restaurants, inviting people to bring their baskets (Ruiz López & Quiroz Lima, 2014).

Students who graduate from the *secundarias comunitarias* may continue their education at the *bachilleratos integrales comunitarios* (BICs), a community-based high-school model (grades 10th through 12th). The first *bachillerato comunitario*, (*Bachillerato Integral Comunitario Ayuujk Polivalente* or BICAP) was the materialization of the ideas of Floriberto Díaz among other Indigenous intellectuals in Santa María Tlahitoltepec and provided a model for the BICs founded by IEEPO in 2001 (Morán, 2013). The main objectives of the BICAP include strengthening education in the mother tongue and in other languages. Like in the *secundarias*, this is done through interdisciplinary research and closely connected to communal, cultural and natural realities, oriented towards the common and communal well-being. An important pedagogical principle in the BICAP and in Mixe communal education is that of *wejën kajën*, the sprouting, awakening of person-people. According to Mixe cosmology, human beings don’t create; “they only re-create what has already been created, that means they construct, invent to transform what is already given by the natural world.” Within that construction, “the person-people sprouts, awakens, puts the *wejën kajën* in motion” (Morán, 2013, n.p.). Learning through *wejën kajën* is an act that is never finished.

Communal education efforts have extended to higher education and especially teacher education to train teachers who are committed to the communal philosophy of education and to

developing proficiency in their Indigenous languages. Perhaps the best-known teacher training institution rooted in *comunalidad* and intercultural education is the ENBIO (Escuela Normal Bilingüe Intercultural de Oaxaca). The aim of the ENBIO is to contribute to “the revitalization, valuing, empowerment, and strengthening of the world view, communal knowledge, customs, traditions, festivals and cultural logic of Indigenous communities” (Reyes, 2007, p.4 in Meyer, 2018, p.393). Students at ENBIO are required to be speakers of an Indigenous language and have deep knowledge of their culture. As part of the program, they spend one year in their communities during which time they collaborate with them to propose a project, transforming community knowledges into a teaching approach that encompasses different themes and subjects, all of this in the Indigenous language (Carballo, 2015; Reyes & Vázquez, 2008).

Schools have been and remain highly contentious spaces (Rockwell & Gomes, 2009), but it is precisely because schooling has always tended to be hegemonic, that the efforts of grassroots education movements have concentrated on reverting the violence perpetuated by the education system through an appropriation and complete transformation and integration of schools with the local reality and local knowledges. Even though ever-changing and fraught with multiple tensions, *comunalidad* as daily praxis is already assumed to be present in the home and the community. The challenge always remains to conceive and re-create education projects that constantly address and respond to these changes and tensions, moving with and along the dynamic spiral of *comunalidad*. One particular challenge is how to address language loss in communities where the language of the community has shifted or is shifting from the Indigenous language to Spanish.

Language and Comunalidad

While there is widespread agreement among *comunalistas* that the native, Indigenous language of a community should be an important pillar of an education grounded on *comunalidad*, there are only a few in-depth discussions on the relationship between language and *comunalidad*. For Floriberto Díaz, who grew up speaking Ayuujk in a community where the language is still actively spoken, the local language variety is one of the main characteristics of an Indigenous community (2007). On the other side, Martínez Luna (2013), from Guelatao, a Zapotec community which has shifted to Spanish, emphasizes that an Indigenous identity is not contingent on the language spoken by the individual or the community. Rendón (2003), a linguist and anthropologist who collaborated closely with different communities in the Sierra Norte, agrees. Similar to Martínez Luna, he does not consider language as one of the four main elements of *comunalidad*, but as a secondary or auxiliary element of culture (along with *cosmovisión*, religiosity and technologies) that crosses the main elements of *comunalidad* in a permanent cyclical process. This is not, as Maldonado (2010a) argues, because language is any less as important than the main elements of *comunalidad*, but because the loss of language, as the loss of other secondary elements, does not translate to a loss of identity. When *comunalidad* but not language has been able to survive decades of ethnocide, the communal social structure provides the foundation from which language can be brought back. It is through *comunalidad*, through *territorio*, *trabajo*, *poder* and *fiesta*, and the ways in which people relate to each other, that the Indigenous language can be reclaimed.

Yásnaya Aguilar Gil (2013), a Mixe linguist and activist who works on the revitalization of Indigenous languages in Oaxaca, captures the ambiguous relationship between language and *comunalidad*, noting that “on the one side, the demand for respect and strengthening [of the Indigenous language] is fundamental, while, on the other, the use of the Indigenous language is not established as a fundamental characteristic to define a *pueblo* or indigenous community” (2013, p.71). Aguilar Gil (2013) considers language as central to *comunalidad*, saying that “if language is not one of

the pillars of comunalidad, it is one of its main creations” (p.81). It is after all through language that interaction within comunalidad is mediated while comunalidad impacts, changes and creates language. But she also argues that the language of comunalidad does not necessarily need to be the Indigenous language. It can also be Spanish in cases where it has displaced the Indigenous language(s) of the community. Both processes of language revitalization and language displacement are communal processes because it is through interaction within the communities, in government, *fiesta*, *asambleas*, etc. that a language can be revitalized or a new language “preferred.” In cases of language displacement, the local Spanish variety spoken in the community would become endemic, the *lengua propia*.

Because comunalidad as a process intricately exists within modernity, determining what constitutes lo propio or “endemic” is a complex and contentious question. Guerrero Osorio (2013) argues that lo propio represents the “originario” or Indigenous, e.g. land, language, agreements, not as something exclusive or that takes priority in time but in terms of its reproduction or recomposition. What is important is not the origin of something but the use that is given to it in the community and whether it aids in its autonomy. Lo propio, Martínez Luna argues, “se comparte, no se guarda,” it is shared, not saved. Only when shared does it gain meaning and does it become embodied (in Guerrero Osorio, 2013, p.54). Thus, whatever language is used becomes the *lengua propia*, though only as long as it aids in its autonomy. Aguilar Gil (2013) acknowledges, however, that the loss of Indigenous languages is directly associated with long standing discrimination towards its speakers and while the maintenance of the Indigenous language does not in fact determine the sustainability of comunalidad, language loss is a violent and systematic process that makes language shift appear as thus it was voluntary. Language displacement is an affront to a community’s autonomy and self-determination.

Responding to this violence, one of the main goals of educación comunitaria is to generate a praxis of resistance against cultural homogenization and form individuals who are able to visibilize the power relationships that are reproduced in schools in order to strengthen the way of life and knowledges in the community (Briseño, 2013). This entails bringing the community into the schools and the Indigenous languages from the community into the school and back into daily use.

Discussion

In this essay, I describe the concept of comunalidad through a narrative literature review of its meanings and pillars, its application to educational initiatives, and its relationship with language. Comunalidad cannot easily be worded, as it lives within the processes that weave the fabric of a community. With that foundational understanding, this section turns back to the second research question namely, how might comunalidad inform efforts toward language revitalization?

Language is (re)created through the interactions and relationships of the social fabric that is the foundation of comunalidad. It is inextricably linked to the epistemologies produced and reproduced through comunalidad and in this sense it is a creation of language just like language is a creation of comunalidad. This echoes Hermes, Bang and Marin’s (2012) assertion that “our epistemological foundations are deeply embedded in our languages; that is the core of what constitutes knowledge, knowing, and being.” A broader conception of language embedded with knowledge and being in the world in particular ways opens new possibilities for language reclamation with strong cultural roots. From this perspective, language reclamation exists in a dynamic, symbiotic relationship with comunalidad. It forms and informs comunalidad while it is informed and strengthened through comunalidad as a framework and practice of everyday resistance.

This interreationality between language and *comunalidad* invites new ways to think about language reclamation as a collective process embedded in the community and for the collective benefit of the community. A pedagogy of *comunalidad* is strictly based on common action (PTEO, 2013). When, for example, students from the *secundaria comunitaria* participate in *tequio*, interview elders or present their projects through *asambleas* or *guelaguetzas pedagógicas*, the intergenerational interactions that take place strengthen the social fabric of the community. The social fabric or *comunalidad* that is created through those processes strengthens the Indigenous language. There is a collective purpose in language reclamation. Through the language, the individual identity is strengthened in relation to others, human and more-than-human, bringing about a sense of belonging to the collective. Just like *comunalidad* is (re)created through collective work, we can conceive of language reclamation as a collective responsibility to strengthen *comunalidad*, both through the Indigenous language as well as through the very process(es) and pedagogies through which it is reclaimed.

Conceiving of language reclamation as a collective task, embedded in and emerging from relational processes, situates it within *comunalidad* as a *pedagogía propia* that cannot be generalized (Martínez Luna, 2010). There are however guiding principles that can help us distinguish language reclamation efforts rooted in *comunalidad* from other, top-down efforts and pedagogies. Echoing the principles guiding *educación comunitaria* (Maldonado, 2016), language reclamation must extend beyond the extensive use of the Indigenous language. It needs to be articulated around local and regional knowledges, the participation of the community in the learning processes, a curriculum suited to the local reality and the communal philosophy as a horizon.

Given the wider urbanization trend— more than 50% of Indigenous peoples in Mexico lives in urban areas (ELAC, 2014)— it is important to also consider how *comunalidad* can inform education and language revitalization efforts in diverse contexts. The ENBIO (*Escuela Normal Bilingüe e Intercultural de Oaxaca*) offers an example of this approach, where students periodically return to their communities to collaboratively develop and implement projects that strengthen the Indigenous language and fabric of their communities.

Even when returning to their communities is not feasible, *comunalidad* can be integrated into academic environments by storying and adopting *comunalidad* as an epistemological framework, fostering spaces that strengthen relationships, processes, and collaboration in the classroom, with families and across the various communities that students belong to.

Conclusion

In and through this essay, I set to understand *comunalidad* as theory and praxis and the ways that it can inform and help nurture and deepen understandings and practices of language revitalization and reclamation. Through a lens of *comunalidad* and informed by the grassroots efforts towards *educación comunitaria* in Oaxaca, we can conceive of language reclamation as a collective responsibility to strengthen community relational practices, both through the use of the Indigenous language (as epistemology, identity, self-determination and resistance) as well as through the very process(es) and pedagogies through which it is reclaimed. A collective orientation towards language reclamation rooted in community practices and processes can open new possibilities to bring the language forward in self-determination. This approach can also have deep relevance for practices and scholarship in other contexts of colonization and struggles for language rights. Thinking of language reclamation as existing within *comunalidad* is an inherent decolonial project, a praxis of daily resistance. If *comunalidad* has been the basis of resistance against ethnocide and linguicide for more than a century,

then processes of language reclamation rooted in comunalidad have the potential to be not only counter-hegemonic, but especially resilient.

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