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The Preservation of Indigenous Knowledge in Contemporary Mexico in *El cultivo del maiz en Yojovi* by Javier Castellanos



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Abstract: The author applies an ecocritical perspective to the study of Javier Castellanos' 1988 monograph of Yojovi corn farmers' testimonies, *El cultivo del maíz en Yojovi*. The author's ecocritical lens establishes Yojovi rights to determine food sustainability practices and to determine land resource use. In particular, the author examines the conflicts between Yojovi knowledge of corn varieties and their cultivation and the pressure to alter their practices to adhere to genetically modified corn crop production. She also reveals the conflicts between Yojovi narratives that situate humans within their natural habitats and the Western scientific paradigm's narratives that tend to separate humans from the natural world.

Keywords: ecocritical, Javier Castellanos, Yojovi, corn farmers, testimonies, *El cultivo del maíz en Yojovi*, food sustainability, land resource, corn varieties, cultivation, genetically modified corn crop production, narratives, natural habitats, Western scientific paradigm

doi:10.18113/P8ik159698

In indigenous communities, stories and storytelling focus on the teaching of mythology, cosmology, and spirituality and are used as a “bridge to get a teaching across to the audience” (Wilson and Fourhorns). The integration of indigenous texts into global discussions on ecological issues has been at the forefront of research in ecocritical studies since the central aspect of indigenous traditions is the intimate relationship between human beings and the natural world. Contemporary indigenous writers of Latin America, such as Javier Castellanos, have introduced ancient oral traditions into written literary forms to create awareness of indigenous peoples' struggle to protect their communities and environments from globalization.ⁱ This essay discusses the impact of Javier Castellanos's 1988 account of testimonials, *El cultivo del maíz en Yojovi* (*The Cultivation of Corn in Yojovi*), on cross-cultural understanding between his native village of Yojovi, Oaxaca and the global community. His monograph emphasizes the intimate relationship between the preservation of the pre-Hispanic practice of cultivating corn and contemporary survival of the Zapotec community. Castellanos shows the importance of cultivating corn (See fig. 1), contrasting it with modern scientific practices of genetic crop modification which are rooted in the abstraction of humans from nature.ⁱⁱ What the author promoted in 1988 found a global expression, almost two decades later in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UN DRIP), in the indigenous peoples' right to “practice and

revitalize their cultural traditions and customs” (“Article 11” 6). This right plays a crucial role in indigenous resistance to homogenous modernization associated with progress and in the current ecological debates on sustainability.

Javier Castellanos Martínez, born on September 20, 1951, in Yojovi, Oaxaca, is a novelist, poet, essayist, playwright, and cultural activist. His 2002 bilingual novel, *Gaa ka chhaka ki. Relación de hazañas del hijo del relámpago* (*The Deeds of the Son of Lightning*), was awarded with the Nezahualcóyotl Prize. In 2013, his literary production received the Award for Indigenous Literatures of America (Premio de Literaturas Indígenas de América). He is also the author, in 1994, of *Wila che be ze Ihao Cantares de los vientos primerizos* (*The Songs of the First Winds*)—the first contemporary novel in an indigenous language, which portrays the problems of his Zapotec community in contemporary Mexico. His works address themes that challenge stereotypical images in Latin American literature that define indigenous cultures, in which the native protagonists are “good”, “ridiculous”, and/or “nostalgic” (*La narrativa* 46). Such stereotypes trivialize indigenous communities, creating discourses that do not reflect their complex contemporary reality and exclude them from confronting global problems. Castellanos intends to correct such clichéd visions of his culture, as well as to refute “the claims of folkloric institutions which consider ingenuousness and fantasy the central point of our storytelling” (39). Therefore, instead of focusing on fantasy, *El cultivo del maíz* addresses the current reality of Zapotec people in Oaxaca, such as the effects of migration to urban areas and environmental degradation of ancestral lands.



Fig. 1. Algunas Razas de Valles Centrales de Oaxaca (Some Varieties of Corn from the Central Valley of Oaxaca, Mexico).

In the introduction to *El cultivo del maíz*, Castellanos confirms the interconnectedness between the identity of his people and their tradition: “our history is that of corn” (238). Corn constitutes an important aspect of Mesoamerican cultures, such as Castellanos’s Zapotec community, because, according to their cosmogony, it was an ingredient which formed the human race—“its flesh, blood, and sustenance” (Florescano 16). Therefore, it has a spiritual and material meaning for their existence, constituting an origin of life and a basic food source. For thousands of years, cultivating corn has been a collective practice in the region, defining the identity of its people: “cultivating corn is the synonym of indigenous identity” (Florescano 26). Castellanos’s story reflects this intimate relationship between corn practices, the cosmogony of the region, memories of the people, and celebrations in Yojovi.

El cultivo del maíz is composed of stories related to Castellanos by three indigenous farmers: Silveria Martínez, Severiano Guzmán, and Edith Castellanos, from Yojovi, Oaxaca. One of the important aspects of their narration is the description of traditional customs and collective agricultural activities in certain periods of the year, such as harvesting, drying, and storing corn. The “protagonists” of *El cultivo del maíz*, Martínez, Guzmán and Castellanos, emphasize the inseparable union between their lives and that of corn, expressing it collectively in the following words: “we cannot separate [corn’s] birth from that of our children, we cannot separate our joy from its joy, its sadness from our sadness, our suffering from its suffering, our death from its death...” (238). In this

worldview, there is an intimate link between the human and nonhuman worlds, and between all the phenomena of the universe. This concept of reciprocity and interdependence generates indigenous peoples' (See fig. 2) moral responsibilities to the environments they inhabit, as observed by Whitt: "They are obligated to provide their lands with sustenance, to sustain them by means of practices and ceremonies" (Whitt, Roberts, Norman, et al. 10). Unlike the Western/modern attitude towards nature characterized by use and exploitation, the indigenous attitude involves use, care, and respect. The descriptions of geography, climate and corn practices in Castellanos's work demonstrate the love and respect the inhabitants of Yojovi have for their ancestral land.

As part of the representation of corn practices, *El cultivo del maíz* revitalizes the indigenous tradition of storytelling. Castellanos's text portrays how indigenous knowledge relies on



Fig. 2. Santo Domingo Yojovi

the oral tradition transmitted through generations for millennia, quoting a phrase frequently heard in his community: "my grandpa tells me that he was told..." (239). Therefore, storytelling plays an important role in preserving Zapotec customs, traditions, and knowledge.ⁱⁱⁱ In contrast with modern science, which relies on supplying statistics, data, and analytics to form knowledge, Zapotec knowledge does not separate the material from the spiritual; rather it perceives the universe from a

holistic perspective. *El cultivo del maíz* reflects this holistic perspective—the link between beliefs, historical memory, tradition, and the natural world, as expressed by the author: "the intellectual talks about life referring to the books he has read, but we talk about our lives referring to the years of good or bad harvest" (238). This statement demonstrates a very personal approach, based on memory, experience, and observation of nature.

Castellanos exposes how the spiritual link between the Zapotecs and their environment is gradually being lost as their sacred land and food are threatened with genetic modification. The destruction of the soil by chemical fertilizers and pesticides causes a rural exodus. One of the narrators of *El cultivo del maíz* reflects nostalgically on the disappearance of certain indigenous traditions due to the growing interest in urban life, stating that: "during the celebration of All Saints' Day, almost everybody brings tamales and then the boys cut medlars, and all eat with lots of joy. But this is also disappearing, because the young people prefer to go to the city" (244). This comment reflects on the meaning and implications of urbanization on indigenous communities. As portrayed in Castellanos's text, young Zapotecs, attracted by economic progress found in the cities, abandon their life in the country to embrace an urban existence dependent on unsustainable over-consumption. Those who stay prefer to cultivate coffee or cane instead of corn because it is more profitable: "to sow corn is not in our interest anymore" (244). Castellanos's work questions this tendency, promoting the respect for the land, indigenous agricultural systems, and traditional uses of local crops. One of the protagonists of his story, don Guillermo, proves that soil, plowed five or six times in order to keep moisture, can produce better crops without the fertilizers; however, it requires more dedication, time, and effort.

The ecological destruction of local environments is not only a physical problem but also a spiritual one, as it results in the loss of cultures and traditions. Joel Simon expressed this idea in *Endangered Mexico: An Environment on the Edge*, observing that “an equally important but less visible loss that comes with the destruction of the forest is the centuries of knowledge about medicinal and edible plants, which is stored in the historical memory of the native inhabitants” (141). Like Simon, Castellanos questions the idea of progress associated with globalization, and emphasizes the importance of revitalizing local beliefs and practices in order to protect the environment. *El cultivo del maíz* demonstrates how the Zapotecs, due to their long tradition of agricultural and ecological knowledge (derived from a meticulous observation of the local environment), know how to grow, gather, and process their native food in a sustainable way, as observed by one of the farmers: “for us, the most important thing is corn; it is our only wealth [...] corn is like our father; thanks to it we can live” (245).^{iv} In contrast with scientific knowledge, the indigenous approach to the environment is “personal rather than abstract”, embedded deeply in their everyday life (Pierotti 23). In current ecological debate, this small-scale and intimate approach offers a valid alternative to the efforts focused at the global/universal level. Castellanos’s focus on corn practices and ceremonies in the local ecosystem of Yojovi promotes the Zapotec’s sovereignty and their unsanctioned right to “practice and revitalize their cultural traditions and customs” (“Article 11” 6). In *El cultivo del maíz*, the preservation of corn practices is inseparable from the preservation of Zapotec cultural identity.

According to Thomas Heyd, “although we may be alienated from our natural environment, due to contemporary socioeconomic conditions, we may recover an appropriate relation to that environment through a certain type of activity or practice” (226). In *El cultivo del maíz* this activity or practice is cultivating corn. Castellanos’s work brings into dialogue the ideals of liberation ecology – a properly Latin American approach to environmental ethics, which argues for restoring a relationship between human beings and environment based on balance and equality (Heyd 226). Since the European conquest, Zapotec resistance has been rooted in a profound knowledge of the local ecosystem and the management of the land, practiced for centuries. In the face of threats posed by globalization, *El cultivo del maíz* asserts this knowledge, calling for strengthening local food systems, developing self-sufficiency, and maintaining Zapotec cultural heritage.

Castellanos’s story addresses questions of global concern—the reevaluation of indigenous knowledge (until recently pertaining to the “distant and poetic zone of myth”), and the stimulation of its dialogue with modern science in order to solve ecological problems (de la Cruz 29). He presents indigenous knowledge as an alternative to the Western scientific/technological paradigm, which is failing to provide sustainability for our planet. By promoting the tradition of cultivating corn in his native community of Yojovi, his work plays an indispensable role in inspiring global indigenous cultural rights activism in the 21st century, and contributes to the ecological debate on “sustainable and equitable development and proper management of the environment” (*Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* 2).

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- ⁱ For more information on promoting indigenous knowledge and traditions see Grim 293.
- ⁱⁱ Castellano's critique of the modern paradigm based on the dualistic abstraction of humans from nature is found in many contemporary environmental discourses. Restoring indigenous life ways of responsibility and respect for the Earth is intimately linked to the formulation of the *Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth* in 2010, since the rights of human beings cannot be separated from the rights of nature.
- ⁱⁱⁱ For information on the role of oral tradition in preserving indigenous knowledge, see Pierotti 23.
- ^{iv} For information on sustainability and the indigenous communities see Pierotti 135. A similar view is expressed by Nelson 202.

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Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Judy Bertonazzi for her insightful comments that have helped to organize and finalize this project.

I would like to thank Javier Cruz for sharing the photographs of Santo Domingo Yojovi, taken by Albino Fernando, from the website Nuestra Sierra Juárez (Oaxaca).

I also express my gratitude to José Morales for consent to include the image of Juan de Dios Gómez Ramirez (Algunas Razas de Valles Centrales de Oaxaca) from Ecochac Oaxaca as a part of this project.