

Singing for the Dead

THE
POLITICS OF
INDIGENOUS
REVIVAL
IN MEXICO



PAJA FAUDREE

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Paja Faudree

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TO MICAH AND DAHLIA

I hope you will sing for me

once I, too, am living in

the land of the dead.

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Note on Orthographic and Linguistic Conventions

An argument I make in this book is that one of the revival movements discussed, the Day of the Dead Song Contest, has broad popular appeal in part because it embraces orthographic heterodoxy. In contradistinction to many other movements promoting vernacular literacy, this project promotes the idea that people should be allowed to write their languages using whatever alphabetic conventions suited them best. This move implicitly disentangles two aspects of vernacular writing that are often treated as coextensive: orthographic standardization and orthographic consistency. Taking my cue from the song contest's approach to writing Mazatec, I stress internal consistency in how I write the language while insisting that the orthographic conventions I have chosen are necessarily arbitrary and not inherently superior to others. Those I use in this book are based largely on the standard orthographic conventions of Latin American Spanish. (See tables Note.1 and Note.2 for the alphabet used in this book.) These conventions are also based on those widely used by indigenous writers—though, as I describe in this book, there is no universally accepted alphabet for writing Mazatec and native writers' orthographies often conflict.

The symbols in parentheses represent sounds that occur only in Spanish loan words commonly used in Mazatec speech. The symbol *x* is used here as it is often used in indigenous Mesoamerican languages: to refer to the sound that in English would be represented by *sh*. When an *x* appears before a vowel, its pronunciation is very retroflexed and sounds almost like *xr* (or *shr* in English); before a consonant, the retroflexion is more subtle. The symbol *č* indicates the retroflexed form of *ch*; the retroflexion causes it to sound somewhat like *chr*, a sound Mazatec speakers refer to as “almost whistled.” The symbol *j* represents a sound like *h* in English—softer than the sound represented by a Spanish *j*. The symbol *ñ* is used, as in Spanish, to refer to the sound that in English might be represented by *ny*.

Mazatec has four vowels, all of which are voiced. Each also exists in nasal-

TABLE NOTE. 1. Mazatec consonants

	Labial	Alveolar	Alveolar Palatal	Retroflexed Alveolar- palatal	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Stops							
voiceless	(p)	t				k	'
voiced	(b)	(d)					
Affricates							
voiceless		ts	ch	č			
Fricatives							
voiceless	f	s		x			j
voiced	v						
Nasals							
voiced	m	n			ɲ		
Lateral		l					
Flap		r					
Trill		(rr)					
Glide			y				

ized form, indicated by adding the symbol *n* after the vowel. The nonnasalized forms mirror the corresponding vowels in Spanish—that is, *i* represents what to English speakers sounds like a long *e* (as in *me*). The symbols *o* and *on* vary freely from high back rounded to low back rounded without contrasting.

Finally, Mazatec is a tonal language, with four distinct pitch levels. The tonality of the language has facilitated the development of a whistled register, well-known among linguists, in which people whistle utterances to each other using tonal patterns whose contours follow the tones of the spoken language. The levels are numbered 1–4, with 1 being the highest in pitch and 4 the lowest. Note that while Mazatec intellectuals who mark for tone often use this convention, as does the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), this diverges from conventions that academic linguists often use. Tone levels are represented by numeric superscripts following a syllable, a convention that is used not only by the SIL, which has published much basic linguistic research on indigenous languages, but also by indigenous authors. Combinations of numbers on a single syllable represent glides in which the tone shifts from one level to another. The actual pitch of any given tone depends in part on the tones that precede and follow it. Tone is extremely important in Mazatec and

TABLE NOTE.2. Mazatec vowels

	Front unrounded	Central unrounded	Back rounded
High	i, in		
Mid	e, en		o, on
Low		a, an	

serves to make lexical, grammatical, and syntactic distinctions. In the text, I give tones at the first instance of a given word or phrase and omit them thereafter, unless tone is directly relevant to the matter discussed. This is similar to what most native speakers do when writing Mazatec: they rarely indicate tone except when failing to do so is likely to produce confusion. In most cases, they leave the reader to resolve ambiguities by context.

When excerpting indigenous authors' work, unless noted otherwise, I have preserved their orthographic decisions. If I give the Spanish version of an indigenous language text, it is the author's own. All translations into English, unless noted otherwise, are mine.

Introduction

LEAVING THE PUEBLO

Years ago, when I left the pueblo, . . . the senior elder, charged with offering wisdom, spoke: . . .

“When you come back, my son, perhaps we will no longer be alive. . . . Probably by then you will not be the same, you will have distanced yourself from us, you will not continue with our way of life. I hope that you are never embarrassed of our pueblo or of your people. . . . Leave us to go on here, where our ancestors are. We will suffer the rest of our lives for failing to keep you here with us.”

—Mario Molina Cruz, poet from Yalálag, from the poem “The Tortilla Tastes Bitter (Leaving the Pueblo),” in *El Volcan de Petalos/Ya ’byalhje xtak yeje*

A Tale of Two Pueblos: Toward a New View of Political Violence

Two months after I began research for this book in the Zapotec town of Yalálag, in Mexico’s Oaxaca State, a man named Roberto Limeta Mestas was killed.¹ According to half of the town, he was murdered by his political enemies. According to the other half, he was the victim of so-called friendly fire, killed not by those he was fighting against but by his own compatriots, who shot him by accident. He and others on the same side of the town’s longstanding political divide were indeed carrying firearms that day: they were guarding the town hall against their enemies on the town’s “other side.” Since the beginning of the year 2000, when the new authorities should have been sworn in, the town had been in the midst of a tense standoff tied to the annual elections. All municipal offices, from the president to the police officers, had been vehemently contested along a political fault line that has divided the town for more than a century. A couple of months into the new year, despite frequent appeals to state officials for intervention, the problem remained unresolved.

The group that Limeta Mestas belonged to, claiming to be the rightful winners of the election, held the municipal buildings by force. The opposing group included the family I lived with and everyone else I knew in town, among them leaders well known nationally for their work in defense of indigenous rights. They continued to call the possession of the municipal buildings illegitimate. One day in March 2000, in the dark hours of the morning, men from the group that opposed Limeta Mestas's faction became fed up with the stalemate. They decided to take back the town hall. Just before dawn, they staged an attack on the men guarding it—armed, according to them, with sticks but no guns.

A violent struggle followed. Several people from both sides were hurt, but Limeta Mestas was the only one who died. In the aftermath, the town filled with state troops and lived under martial law; for months afterward, the political crisis in Yalálag made state and national news. Dozens of suspects spent more than a month languishing in jail, then months more trying to exit the judicial quagmire into which they had fallen. People on both sides were afraid of reprisals and left town to live with relatives; many stayed away for the rest of the year.

Yalálag's political divisions are longstanding and deep. Of the numerous scholars who have conducted research on the town, all comment on Yalálag's entrenched factionalism. Works on the town include Julio de la Fuente's classic ethnography documenting both internal and intervillage conflicts (de la Fuente 1949); Lourdes Gutiérrez Najera's more recent ethnography, in which her informants repeatedly told her, "Yalálag's history is a history of conflict" (Gutiérrez Najera 2007: 16); and Peter Guardino's history of political culture in Oaxaca, in which his periodic mentions of Yalálag describe more than a century of disputes and conflicts (Guardino 2005: 227, 243, 245, 248). Nonetheless, after this particular event, the hostility in town was more open and bitter than it had been in decades. This reinscription of longstanding factionalism had a profound and pervasive impact on how people lived their daily lives: which stores they visited, which telephone kiosks they used, which paths they took through town, whom they spoke to and whom they refused to greet, what they discussed, and whom they sat next to and—conversely—avoided on the buses in and out of town.

I never met the man who died. Even if I had, he probably would have refused to speak to me, writing me off as a committed partisan biased by my close friendships with people from the opposing faction. Nevertheless, his death and the political crisis surrounding it affected me directly: my plans to conduct research in Yalálag on revival activities tied to the Zapotec language

ultimately became impossible to pursue. More important, though, Limeta Mestas's death contains a powerful lesson about how political violence is routinely conceptualized: what typical accounts of ethnic conflict stress and, just as crucial, what they often elide and render invisible.

From a statistical point of view, Limeta Mestas's death was but one of hundreds of politically motivated deaths that occur each year in indigenous communities in Oaxaca alone. There is no official accounting of the phenomenon, but incidents of lethal violence in indigenous settlements appear nearly daily in the state newspaper. Anthropological depictions of the region frequently have stressed its endemic violence; proportionate to the overall population, the murder rate in many indigenous communities exceeds homicide levels in some of America's most violent inner cities (see Greenberg 1989).² Yet it is precisely because this single death forms part of a larger pattern of violence that it is of broader significance. Furthermore, its importance goes beyond the most commonly proposed reasons for such violence: centuries of institutionalized exploitation, structural poverty, and new social and economic pressures linked to globalization and neoliberal land reforms, among others. Rather, the issues at stake that day when the two groups fought each other in the dark in front of the town hall included many aspects of social life that rarely appear in accounts explaining the occurrence of violence.

One of the least publicized casualties of the conflict was a cultural revitalization movement then taking place in Yalálag. It unfolded under the auspices of an organization called Uken Ke Uken, or the Center for the Study and Development of the Zapotec Language and Tradition. The projects introduced by this relatively recent addition to Yalálag's cultural landscape included a language workshop promoting Zapotec literacy and producing Zapotec texts, a municipal brass and wind band that performed for town fiestas, a cultural center promoting a variety of activities that included instruction for children and adults in how to read and play music, and a municipal radio station with Zapotec-language programming.³ Until the political crisis attached to the municipal elections, all of the activities had been housed at the town hall. The center's leaders claimed that holding its activities in the town hall allowed them to be fully communitarian, open to participation by any and all. Given the town's entrenched political divisions, however, it is not surprising that this view was not universally held. Members of Limeta Mestas's group opposed the activities as partisan and shut them down once they took control of the town hall at the beginning of the year.

This attempt at cultural revival, then, was directly involved in the violent altercation that took place at the town hall. Several of Uken Ke Uken's leaders

were among the lead suspects in Limeta Mestas's death. The legal and financial hardships they faced after the attack meant that for the rest of that year, and for much of the year that followed, they were unable to even begin seriously discussing, let alone acting on, plans to continue with the center's activities. Not until years had passed was Uken Ke Uken as a group able to tackle its internal disagreements about how best to realize the center's vision. It took years before they were able to resolve the problem of whether or not to go on with the center's plans, even if they could not do so as part of the official local government. Once the group made the difficult decision to proceed outside formal municipal support, it faced the long process of acquiring the necessary resources to support the center's activities and build a new structure to house it.

As the political crisis in Yalálag wore on, I began looking for a new site where I could research linguistic revival. I focused on other communities in Oaxaca State, one of the world's most culturally diverse regions. Officially, Oaxaca has sixteen distinct indigenous groups living in an area roughly the size of Indiana.⁴ Most of the groups speak languages with multiple mutually unintelligible variants, a level of internal variation that is dramatically greater than that found in some other Mexican indigenous languages.⁵ For example, the Instituto Nacional de Lenguas Indígenas (National Institute of Indigenous Languages; INALI) claims that the two largest Oaxacan language groups each have more than sixty variants (sixty-two for Zapotec and eighty-one for Mixtec) and lists sixteen variants for Mazatec, the third-largest linguistic group. By contrast, Yucatec Maya, the country's second-largest group, has only one variant (INALI 2008a).

Eventually, I found my way to Nda Xo, a small town perched on the edge of a deep canyon in the Sierra Mazateca.⁶ Like Yalálag, it is home to various local projects aimed at cultural and linguistic revival. While the projects in the two towns are similar—and somewhat unusual nationally—in being linked to music, on this point they also differ in one significant way: Yalálag's communal music program is directed at instrumental music played by the town's wind bands, tied, in turn, to literacy in Western musical notation. Thus, this aspect of the initiative is not an indigenous revival project (although it is institutionally and practically enmeshed with many activities that are), nor does it directly support the indigenous language. Given that the medium of instruction and much of the communication for the band's activities take place in Spanish, such musical practices arguably operate at the expense of the indigenous language. By contrast, Nda Xo's revival projects are based on singing in the indigenous language, Mazatec, rather than in Spanish. These

musical practices not only bolster the use of Mazatec, but they also expand its use into new realms while recruiting new speakers: young people who grow up hearing Mazatec but do not speak it. Yet a result of the revival projects I describe here, they are now beginning to sing in the language. As I discuss further, the broad—and in many ways, remarkable—success of these Mazatec revival projects is also intimately bound to the strategic use of singing across a range of contexts.

In other respects, though, Yalálag and Nda Xo are remarkably alike. Both towns are deeply divided politically, and competing ideas about indigenous language and culture are thoroughly implicated in longstanding political tensions. The two towns are also similar to each other—and unlike many other indigenous communities—in that the revival initiatives are widely popular. In my hunt for a new field site, I was surprised to learn that communities where revival movements have substantial appeal beyond the indigenous leaders spearheading them are relatively rare. Instead, revival initiatives often remain the pursuit of educated elites. I will have more to say in due course about why this is so, but what I repeatedly encountered at that time was the tendency for indigenous writers and activists who promote revival projects to live in regional cities rather than in the indigenous communities from which they hail—driven there, ironically, by the same economic forces that cause the cultural erosion against which revival movements fight.

Such forces touch ground in indigenous communities across Mexico, nowhere more so than in Oaxaca, Mexico's poorest state and, not coincidentally, its most indigenous (see map I.1; see table I.1).⁷ Oaxaca is filled with the kind of communities that have been hit hardest by the negative effects of globalization and the neoliberal restructuring measures of the 1980s and 1990s. With few exceptions, the cornerstone of rural Mexico's economy until that time was overwhelmingly agricultural; maize was far and away the most important crop. With the elimination of farm subsidies and the reversal of postrevolutionary measures aimed at protecting—and co-opting—the rural peasantry, indigenous farmers were forced to compete on the free market as never before. Once the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) passed, the fate of Oaxaca's farmers became increasingly linked to U.S. markets, where corn remains heavily subsidized by the federal government.

As a result, the small-scale agriculture pursued by indigenous communities has become dramatically less viable since the economic crisis of the 1980s. Out-migration, now spanning generations, has been a widespread response, as people leave the pueblo in search of work elsewhere. Oaxaca has been at the leading edge of this trend, with one of the highest rates of domes-



MAP 1.1. The country of Mexico (officially, the United States of Mexico), showing Oaxaca State and the major regional cities discussed in the book.

tic and international migration in the country.⁸ Although Yalálag is a small town by American standards, it is the largest in the Sierra Norte; only half of its 5,000 citizens are permanent residents—roughly 2,500 live in Yalálag permanently, while roughly 2,500 live in the United States, mostly in Los Angeles. According to locals interviewed by journalists following the confrontation at the town hall, 80 percent of young men leave the community, primarily for economic reasons, although also to pursue educational opportunities.⁹

These migration patterns have material effects, no less for indigenous writers than for indigenous farmers. One effect is that language revival movements in Mexico frequently play out in regional and national urban centers and, ironically, unfold less frequently in the rural, indigenous communities where indigenous languages remain the primary medium of communication. In communities where such movements do become part of quotidian life, they become enmeshed with other communitarian issues and invariably are implicated in political divisions. Certainly this was true of the confrontation taking place in Yalálag. As the two groups fought each other that morning in front of the town hall, their bloodied hands dragged Yalálag's divisive past

TABLE I.1. States in Mexico with the highest percentage of speakers of indigenous languages

State	Number of speakers older than five who speak at least one indigenous language	Percentage of indigenous language speakers relative to total state population	Number of indigenous language speakers older than five who do not speak Spanish	Percentage of indigenous language speakers who do not speak Spanish relative to total population of indigenous language speakers
Oaxaca	1,165,186	34.2	188,230	16.2
Yucatán	537,516	30.3	40,273	7.5
Chiapas	1,141,499	27.2	371,315	32.5
Quintana Roo	196,060	16.7	8,867	4.5
Guerrero	456,774	15.1	134,797	29.5
Hidalgo	359,972	15.1	43,991	12.2
Campeche	91,094	12.3	2,926	3.2
Puebla	601,680	11.7	57,649	9.6
San Luis Potosí	248,196	10.7	19,439	7.8
Veracruz	644,559	9.4	66,646	10.3
United States of Mexico	6,695,228	6.7	980,894	14.7

Source: INEGI 2010.

into the new millennium, reinscribing it at the same time with present conflicts. Among them are opposing views about local language and culture, the meaning of modernity, and the town's relationship to the nation. The fight to preserve and promote particular ideas about indigenous language and culture is not only figurative but also literal. Although it may be rare for people to kill or be killed for those ideas, people are nevertheless willing to make great sacrifices to defend them.

Nationalism and Its Discontents:

The Modern Renaissance in Indigenous Literatures

This book offers a different perspective on ethnic politics from the one that scholarly accounts generally consider, a perspective whose insights about the lived stakes of political difference are grounded in concerns that are not explicitly political.¹⁰ I argue that the meaning of one of the most distinctive hallmarks of the present era—that globalization and the assertion of local ethnic identities are advancing hand in hand across the globe—can be interpreted only by looking beyond the narrowly political.¹¹ Understanding the political dynamics of modern—and postmodern—entities such as the nation requires ethnographically examining how people experience activities that are only sometimes read in political terms, and that relate to ideas about the nation not directly but in oblique and hidden ways.¹²

I take up these issues of broad social and scholarly import by using Mexico's contemporary indigenous revival movements as a case study. One of the leading forces in the growing ascendance of the global South, Mexico exhibits characteristics of many postnational states: it remains at once one of the most powerful and cohesive nation-states in Latin America and yet recently has begun to be spoken of as a "failed" state. While the spectacular narcotrafficking violence has been instrumental in eliciting such discourses, drug violence is not the only threat to Mexican national cohesion. Nor is it the only force eroding the importance of national boundaries while strengthening the power of both international influences and local ties in the everyday reality of many Mexicans. Other forces include the development of a truly multiparty democracy, as the power of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party; PRI) has waned and that of other parties has increased.¹³ Oaxaca's elections of 2010, for example, mark a watershed event in state politics while also fitting into a broad national trend—the PRI lost its first gubernatorial election in the state when parties from opposing ends of the political spectrum formed a coalition to defeat the

ruling party. Other forces, too, have played a role: the ever changing face of migration to the United States in the wake of NAFTA, the various attempts at so-called immigration reform in the United States and their attendant backlash, and, of course, mounting drug violence and shifting government policies toward the illegal drug trade.

This book engages with all of these forces but focuses on another still: escalating demands for indigenous autonomy and recognition, which have led to broad-based social movements and internal political conflict. Revival movements are a particularly fruitful place to examine how assertions of ethnic difference and their challenges to national belonging are worked out in practice. In particular, viewing such politically charged issues through the lens of the not explicitly political—by looking at art and culture as rich sources of information about political conflict—yields new perspectives on the dynamics of political difference. Furthermore, in the case of a particular revival movement I document, the ostensibly apolitical character of its artistic and cultural activities is precisely what allows it to create specific political effects. In other words, the political success of this revival movement is possible only because of how it draws on realms of life that are valenced as apolitical and free of economic interest.

This book thus tells the story of an astonishingly successful cultural revival. People from the Sierra Mazateca have managed to reverse decades of cultural and linguistic erosion to revive and reinvent lost customs. The center of this renaissance is a fierce vindication of the indigenous language spoken—and sung—throughout the region. Not only is Mazatec the shared medium of daily life for most people, but some of its specific qualities foreground its relationship to music. Mazatec is a tonal language with a whistled register. In this “whistle speech” so famous among linguists, people communicate by whistling the tonal contours of spoken language. These features are among those that support the linguistic ideology, commonly expressed in the Sierra, that “our language is like singing.”¹⁴

Renewed attachment to the Mazatec language is promoting powerful new ideas about community by tying people not only to others living across the region but also to the dead who share their language. Through communion with the dead, the living are linked to history, to the land, and to utopian visions of the past that are transforming the present. The key sites for this transformation are the region’s most distinctive customs: rituals held annually during Day of the Dead and the religious use of hallucinogenic plants to heal the sick and divine the future. More importantly, the revival of indigenous-language singing in such settings has been tied innovatively to the introduc-

tion of writing, making literacy in the indigenous language a potent political catalyst promoting broad unity across the region. This newfound linguistic and ethnic solidarity has in turn become a powerful new political reality. By collectively singing in a shared, stigmatized language, people forge new ideas about community that bind the living with the dead and the old with the young, balance the pull of past traditions against the pressures of modernization, and demand recognition within the national imagination while claiming distinctive ethnic identities at odds with standing models of Mexican citizenship.

This case, in other words, offers an alternative model of national plurality and ethnic politics in which revival practices presented and perceived as apolitical can produce powerful political results. The political success of this case suggests why ethnic revival has had such prevalence worldwide: revival promises—and in some cases, delivers—a resolution between the often untenable costs of national belonging for ethnic minorities and the often unacceptable threat to national unity posed by minorities' assertions of difference. In describing why I think that this case was popularly successful where others like it have not found similar popular appeal, I identify two interrelated tensions—two sets of opposing forces—that haunt all revival movements. The first of these polarities I have already touched on: the tension between the overtly political agenda of revival projects—their goal of restructuring relations between ethnic groups and the state—and the need to position them as rising above political factions in order to acquire broad appeal. The second polarity is related to the first and concerns those who lead revival movements. They face the structural paradox that their authority and legitimacy are based on their “representativeness” with respect to the community at large. Yet the practical demands of leading revival movements requires them to have skills, take part in activities, and indeed live lives that set them apart as unique. This pair of interrelated tensions is manifested in the Sierra Mazateca in the lives of people—mushroom shamans, coffee farmers, indigenous authors, village schoolteachers, local shopkeepers, political activists—who are affected by the revival projects I document. The methods used in these revival projects—methods tied to the indigenous language and even more specifically to singing—have been critical to the movements' success, opening new possibilities for reconciling the tensions raised by revival.

Both of these tensions are related, furthermore, to the temporal aspect of social movements, which require particular relationships to the past and to its lived realities in the present. Human beings have long viewed the past as a resource, an ark housing cultural treasures that can be recovered and

given new flesh in the present. Thus, histories across the globe are marked by periods of renaissance, when people renew and reinvent something from the past that was literally or metaphorically lost.¹⁵ The present is no exception: the widespread emergence of indigenous and ethnic revival movements worldwide attests to as much. Postcolonial and postnational in nature, these projects ostensibly aim to rescue extinct past practices and endangered present ones from the eroding, marginalizing legacies of colonial and national domination. At the heart of such projects, however, lies a paradoxical tension between departure from the past and allegiance to it. For in reviving the past, people necessarily also rely, deliberately or not, on innovation and creativity. Sometimes the newness deployed in revival is explicitly admitted and sometimes it is deliberately denied, but adapting the past to the present always involves a generative friction between the two when perceptions of the past—often incomplete and selective—knock against the needs and norms of the present.

Thus, revival projects by definition are counterhegemonic and by disposition are ethnically purist; nativism and revival are two sides of the same coin. Among the critical tropes on which both notions turn—for intellectuals driving revival projects as well as their audiences—are two closely related concepts: authenticity and tradition. Both, in turn, are tied—particularly in the context of indigenous revival and identity politics—to ideas about authority. In promoting conceptions of the past as prescriptive guides for the present, indigenous intellectuals must adopt views of the past that emphasize above all their link to tradition as representative of essentialized indigenous identities, codified as the authentic “us” as a people.

At the same time, such intellectuals must make explicit how the practices they promote differ from present ones, for their prescriptive value—their ability to shape and change current practices—lies in such distinctiveness. However, this recontextualization introduces resistance between the original context and the new one, which turns around precisely the concepts of authenticity and tradition. Although the dynamic interplay of the old and the new is evoked by the labels (renaissance, revival) for such movements, the ideology that intellectuals use to promote them is explicitly retro-normative, locating the rules for proper behavior in an idealized past. Such agendas center on notions of tradition embodied in ostensibly authentic past practices that simultaneously exclude and seek to replace corresponding practices in the present. Yet tradition represents not only a timeless past that no longer exists, but also its persistence in the present as collective norms. The slippage between the two lends an inherent instability to what individuals mean by the

terms *authenticity* and *tradition*—slippage that leads to shifting understandings about the authority on which indigenous representatives draw. Thus, the essentialized collective identity promoted by indigenous intellectuals, pitched against at least some present norms, is often at odds with the lived reality of many members of their audiences.

The ambiguity produced by this semantic instability places both indigenous intellectuals and their revival efforts in an inherently paradoxical position. Although such leaders must appeal to authenticity and tradition, their interpretations of these terms often conflict with the norms of other community members. This is arguably a particularly acute tension for indigenous peoples and their representatives, as some recent scholarship suggests (e.g., de la Cadena and Starn 2007) and as is underscored by ongoing popular discussions of indigenous leaders such as Evo Morales of Bolivia. Furthermore, many of the very qualities that allow indigenous individuals to lead revival projects—that they are highly literate, bilingual, and relatively cosmopolitan—make them further subject to claims of inauthenticity by the very people for whom they purport to speak. To put the issue another way, the abilities and ideological dispositions that authorize indigenous intellectuals to participate in national and even international debates about indigenous rights are often the very same ones that, from a local perspective, may delegitimize them as authoritative representatives of indigenous communities.

The negotiation of such disparities, the social conflicts they engender, and the challenges they can pose to large-scale unifying entities such as nations have, of course, been a central concern in the social sciences since their inauguration. From the founding fathers of the discipline through leading theorists of the present, social scientists have been deeply interested in how complex social collectivities endure despite profound internal differences. One of the most important lines of inquiry has addressed the construction of the modern nation-state, whose rise as a dominant global paradigm is closely linked historically to the scholarly ethos out of which the modern disciplines themselves were born. Yet recent social science research has also grappled with threats to this paradigm, such as increasing globalization and the emergence of various transnational and subnational ethnic and indigenous movements.

In Mexico, the interaction between indigenous people and the state as it continues to incorporate them has been of special interest because, unlike many other Latin American countries, the Mexican state is relatively strong. Thanks to the Revolution, the state has engaged directly and actively with its indigenous populations rather than, for example, treating them with be-

nign (or not so benign) neglect. However, the Zapatista uprising of 1994 in Chiapas—a state that, like Oaxaca, is both ethnically diverse and heavily indigenous—made only too clear the limits of state power and relevance. Often called the first “postmodern rebellion,” the armed conflict itself was extremely short and a farce, militarily speaking: some of the ski-masked indigenous insurgents gracing the covers of newspapers across the world carried not actual guns but slabs of wood painted to resemble them. Rather, the power of the rebels was almost entirely moral and political as they leveraged media coverage of the uprising into international pressure on the Mexican government to listen to their demands. Through both explicit rhetoric and strategic use of Revolutionary symbols, the Zapatistas demonstrated how completely the Mexican government had failed to deliver on the Revolution’s promise to redress the chronic social inequality and marginalization experienced over centuries by the nation’s poor and indigenous populations. The leaders of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, especially the media darling Subcomandante Marcos, were extremely savvy in their use of press coverage. Their power within Mexico owes as much to the pressure their international support brought to bear on the government as it does to pressure from “below”—that is, from the millions of indigenous people in Mexico who to this day are living in conditions of abject poverty.

The ethnic diversity that such indigenous peoples represent—and the challenge it has posed for the modern Mexican state’s attempt to form a unified national identity—are not new. Long before Columbus’s first voyage, the portion of North America that became Mexico was a region of overwhelming linguistic and cultural diversity. In the centuries before the Spanish Crown made Mexico a center of its colonial enterprise as New Spain, rulers of several successive Mesoamerican empires faced, in the diversity of the populations they subjugated, similar threats to large-scale cohesion. The area’s immense linguistic diversity has been particularly problematic for pre-Columbian imperial, European colonial, and nationalistic projects. Today, sixty-eight officially recognized languages are spoken in Mexico, a number much diminished from pre-Contact levels due to the deaths of massive numbers of indigenous people during the conquest and colonization. Further, the number of indigenous languages currently spoken in Mexico would expand exponentially if the languages were divided into units that reflect mutual intelligibility.¹⁶ At the same time, language use has been one of the key sites of resistance to and critique of imperialist projects. In Mexico—unlike in neighboring Guatemala, for example—the primary marker of indigenous identity is language use.¹⁷ The valorization of indigenous languages has played a criti-

cal role in countering the state's efforts aimed at assimilating indigenous people and erasing ethnic difference. Furthermore, many indigenous groups have specifically focused such efforts at bolstering indigenous languages on their poetic and literary uses.

Such projects are precisely what a narrowly political view of ethnic difference tends to ignore. Particularly in social contexts of extreme power imbalance, the importance played by poetic concerns often becomes relegated to the margins as interethnic relations are read primarily in economic or political terms. Yet ethnic conflicts often center on the right to control which cultural narratives matter and will become emblematic of the core beliefs and values that define, unite, and position a group within larger collectives such as nation-states. The worldwide emergence of cultural and linguistic revival is one of the most important indicators of the vital role played in social life by the ability to control poetic expression.¹⁸

Revival takes a variety of forms, but one of the most common concerns writing: the creation of written literatures in minority languages. Literary creation also requires a secondary process of producing audiences with the skills—such as literacy in indigenous languages—needed to use such texts. Like other indigenous peoples worldwide, Zapotecs and Mazatecs who can read and write are overwhelmingly literate exclusively in the national language. Though a large corpus of pre-Columbian and colonial texts in Mexican indigenous languages exists, this indigenous literary tradition is discontinuous. Writing in indigenous languages was largely abandoned early in the national period once bilingualism and literacy in Spanish became sufficiently widespread.¹⁹ Thus, modern literatures in indigenous languages date almost entirely from the last few decades.²⁰ During this period, indigenous peoples across Mexico have witnessed an impressive renaissance in indigenous writing. Almost all languages still spoken have at least one indigenous author and various books published in the language; the larger languages have many of both. Because indigenous languages circulate almost exclusively orally, literacy movements have emerged alongside the literary ones, aimed at teaching indigenous peoples how to read and write in their native languages.

These indigenous texts include older as well as more innovative forms in various media, whose central unifying characteristic is the poetic use of language: oral narratives, written poems and novels, song performances, recorded songs, and written lyrics. An enduring question raised by revival concerns how continuity with tradition and the generative potential of creativity are negotiated in practice—on poetic and cultural terms, as well as political ones. The tension between maintaining stasis and introducing change

also involves how indigenous writers navigate the inherent contradictions entailed by adapting traditional expressive forms to new (Western) genres and media.

These matters are of particular interest here because they are live concerns for indigenous Mexican writers. But they have also been of enduring consequence to scholars working on themes of broad and enduring relevance such as literature and nationalism, the social meaning of literacy, the politics of artistic representation and value, the social importance of differences across genres and media, and the role of art in promoting social change. The case I discuss and the approach I take to it address a need in existing work on literatures and literacy while also posing a challenge to the corpus in important ways. I thus turn briefly to this research, demonstrating from another angle why the case study at the center of this book is illustrative beyond its immediate context.

On Great Divides: Toward a New Methodology

In this book I focus on social movements tied to indigenous literatures and literacy. I examine the activities of intellectuals who lead revival movements, as well as responses others have to their revival initiatives. By providing a holistic ethnography of indigenous texts—coupling textual history and analysis with the community-based study of textual production and reception—I offer a new perspective on ethnic politics in Mexico.

Little has been written about modern indigenous literatures and literacy in Mexico, despite their broad significance. Efforts to promote indigenous literatures and literacy affect every indigenous community in Mexico and constitute a highly visible portion of Mexico's national commitment to ethnic plurality. My contribution to our understanding of indigenous language literatures and literacy is methodological as well as substantive. I approach this field of inquiry by addressing a conceptual problem running beneath the scholarly and applied work that analyzes ethnic revival and indigenous writing. Namely, both bodies of work often share the underlying assumption that text and context are separable. I argue that text and context, production and reception, cannot be separated in practice. Furthermore, understanding the nature of their interconnections—how text and context co-construct each other, how creation and reception are dialectically intertwined—is essential to understanding why people alternately embrace and resist revival movements.

The key to understanding how text and context, reception and production

combine in this case is to focus on language use in its totality. This means attention not just to the “total linguistic fact”—linguistic form, ideology, and use (Silverstein 1985)—but also the related triad of writing, speaking, and, crucially, singing. By studying revival movements in this way, I illuminate the practical challenges people face in balancing political agendas against apolitical inclusiveness, present innovations against fidelity to the past. The case study I present sheds light on the paradoxical position that indigenous intellectuals—and, perhaps, minority representatives generally—must navigate in stabilizing such tensions. Their predicament, furthermore, mirrors parallel constraints haunting Western scholarship.

ON ORALITY AND LITERACY: THE MISSING THIRD TERM

Any discussion of the impact of literacy and the creation of new writing traditions invokes by design or by accident the old debate about the social implications of oral versus written communication. This question, of course, has been the target of intense theorization across the humanities and social sciences. Although positions on the matter do come in shades of gray, those taken by leading figures in the debate cluster around two poles. Some theorists have claimed that the introduction of systems of writing into oral cultures—whether historical or contemporary—leads to generalized, universal transformations in cognition and social complexity. Such proponents of the autonomous model of literacy tie the advent of writing to the development of law, democracy, individualism, Protestantism (and therefore, capitalism), science, and even rational thought.²¹ Theorists who support the opposing view, known as the ideological model, have challenged both the monolithic Great Divide that the opposing theorists posit between orality and literacy and the linkage they presume between large-scale social change and literacy *per se* (see Besnier 1995; Clanchy 1990; Finnegan 1988; Street 1993, 2003).²² Linguistic anthropologists in particular have stressed that viewing orality and literacy as separable or uniform across cultures is inherently untenable. They argue that the preoccupation with the transformation from oral to written expression is predicated on Western, logocentric views of communication.²³

The debate has been going on long enough within scholarly circles that it sometimes ceases to be very productive, with those on opposing sides speaking past each other. Nevertheless, the debate does have ongoing practical relevance: social programs espoused by entities ranging from federal governments to ethnic organizations to individual actors engage variously with the issues it raises. Literacy policies and initiatives rely on a range of claims about the social transformations that literacy and the promotion of new writ-

ing practices will or will not produce. They make a variety of assumptions about the modularity of literacy, about how permeable or impervious it may be to local contexts. For this reason, it is worth discussing the debate not with the aim of settling it but, rather, with the intention of understanding the salience of its competing claims in the world of literacy and writing as practice. Tools from linguistic anthropology have a contribution to make here. By looking at literacy ethnographically, in specific social contexts in which literacy practices come into contact with ideologies about texts and the people who use and produce them, we can understand the concrete effects that literacy does—and does not—have. By looking at language in practice, we can see how literacy policies and the claims and assumptions on which they are predicated touch ground and come to have specific material expressions.

One important strain of linguistic anthropological research—though it does not consider the literacy debate *per se*—examines the practical dynamics and political import of social engagement with texts. This work focuses on the processes by which texts of various sorts are produced, disseminated, interpreted, used, and placed in productive intertextual and interdiscursive relations to other texts and discourses.²⁴ This literature foregrounds how practice and ideology shape text creation, creating a space for examining the role of innovation in “the social life of texts”—even in revival movements where the past and tradition are explicitly invoked. The ethnographic focus of this work has allowed for a humanistic, cross-cultural approach to textuality in which individuals in social context interact in specific ways with texts.

However, largely missing from this literature is the consideration, alongside speaking and writing, of a third linguistic mode: singing. Leading theorists have consistently cast the literacy debate as a question about the relationship between orality and literacy. In addition, influential theorists primarily pursuing other scholarly agendas—for example, Jacques Derrida in *Of Grammatology* (1998 [1976])—merely reinforce the discursive grooves that confine discussions of language to speech and writing.²⁵ Even otherwise careful analyses do not consider singing—for example, Benjamin Lee’s analysis of Habermas’s ideas on textuality: “the textuality of language raises questions about the relations between oral and written communication” (Lee 1992: 416). What about singing? Should not discussions of genre—which follow in Lee’s discussion—consider how song would expand the taxonomy? Lee’s characterization is symptomatic of a pervasive bias in discussions about relations among modes of communication, in which singing is relatively rarely considered in its own right alongside writing and speaking.

Yet singing is often critically involved in the processes by which texts are