Indigenous Transborder\textsuperscript{1} Ethnic Identity Construction in Life and on the Net: The Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales (FIOB)\textsuperscript{2}


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In this paper I focus on the use of digital technology by one transborder organization. \textsuperscript{1} The term transborder community refers to indigenous communities that have an origin place within Mexico but currently exist in multiple sites in different parts of Mexico and in the U.S. connected by interlocking networks of members. The kinds of borders community members cross are not only national, but legal, cultural, social, and racial. For that reason I use the term “transborder” rather than “transnational.” The term “transnational” is a subset of the concept of “transborder.”

The Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales (FIOB) has used e-mail and its web site to build a public presence in Mexican and U.S. cyberspace. The FIOB has also used the internet as an organizing tool to exert political pressure in both the U.S. and Mexico. FIOB activists have also used digital technology as part of a process that Jonathan Fox calls the “scaling up” of collective identity from home community, to shared region of origin, to shared pan-ethnic indigenous identity (2006:47). The FIOB publicly constructs its identity by linking local, regional, national, and transborder or

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binational dimensions of indigenous identity with a multi-sited understanding of location. There are processes internal to Mexico as well as related to the experience of migration and exploitation that can facilitate the integration of ethnic indigenous identity from the local to the regional level (and beyond) **Digital Border Crossing**

Digital border crossing is often an important dimension of transborder communities. While much has been made of the role of the internet in building solidarity for the Zapatista movement in Chiapas (see Cleaver 1998; Stephen 2002), outside of electronic money transfers and the use of ATMs little attention has been paid to how digital communication is entering the lives of transborder migrants in maintaining their family relationships, in cross-border political organizing, solidarity, human rights defense, and in the construction of ethnic identities. Digital technology has become increasingly important for transborder migrants in both the U.S. and in Mexico. The Mexican Internet Association stated that there are about 12 million Mexicans who used the Internet in 2003. Some hometown associations have set up their own websites or pressured municipal governments in their own hometowns to set up websites that are monitored from the U.S. to follow local elections, to keep up on the progress of public works projects being funded by remittances from the U.S., and to organize political pressure both in Mexico and the U.S. (R. Smith 2002). The Mexican government offers on-line resources to Mexican migrants in the U.S. through its virtual consulates (La Embajada de Mexico en Los Estados Unidos), web sites dedicated to helping migrants such as the web-based “Guia del Migrante Mexicano” (Guide for Mexican Migrants) published on line by Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores of Mexico (2004). I offer an amended version here of Michel Laguerre’s definition of virtual diaspora.
The use of cyberspace by immigrants or descendants of an immigrant group for the purpose of participating or engaging in online interactional transactions, wherever their actual physical location. Virtual transborder communities are extensions of real transborder communities. No virtual transborder community can be sustained without real life transborder crossing and in this sense, it is not a separate entity, but rather a pole of a continuum (adapted from Laguerre 2002).

**The Frente Indígena Oaxaqueño Binacional: Transborder Digital Organizing in Mexico and the U.S.**

The ability to simultaneously incorporate indigenous ethnic identities at local, regional, national, and even binational levels for specific political purposes and goals (Fox 2006, Blackwell 2006) is aptly illustrated by the Frente Indígena Oaxaqueño Binacional (FIOB). The integration of different levels of ethnic identity and strategies of political organizing in the FIOB is closely linked to the personal histories of some of its key leaders. For example, Rufino Domínguez Santos began working on a local struggle in his community, went on to work with a regional indigenous peasant organization in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, and then began organizing indigenous migrants in Baja California and later California-- all before helping to found the Frente Mixteco-Zapoteco (FM-ZB, Mixtec-Zapotec Binational Front) which later became the FIOB.

As seen in Rufino’s autobiographical narrative, his early experience with Marist priests combined an education in social justice with an inter-ethnic experience as he went to school with both Mixe and Mixtec students. His first political organizing was in his own community followed closely by an intense experience in 1983 with the Isthmus
Coalition of Workers, Peasants, and Students (COCEI, Coalición de Obreros, Campesinos y Estudiantes del Istmo Rufino) was a part of intense demonstrations by COCEI supporters at the time and observed what could happen with a regional organization that promoted cultural programs around Zapotec language and identity, reclaimed land, and developed public works projects benefiting the poor.

From Tehuantepec he returned to his own community to help organize a community assembly to rid San Miguel Cuevas of a local cacique and to democratize local government. From there he went to Sinaloa to work among agricultural workers with CIOAC and then to Baja California. In getting together with other indigenous leaders in 1991 to found what would become the FIOB, he brought his Oaxacan, Sinaloan, and Baja California experiences with him. By the early 1990s--both within Mexico and in the U.S.--pan-ethnic indigenous organizing in relation to specific indigenous ethnicities (i.e. Zapotec, Mixtec, etc.) has already consolidated (see Kearney 1988, 1995, Nagengast and Kearney 1989). The formation of the FM-ZB occurred at a time when both pan-ethnic and pan-indigenous organizing and conversations were on the rise within Mexico as well as in the U.S. among indigenous Mexicans.

Many indigenous organizations also participated in a wide range of activities protesting 500 years of colonialism in 1992 which was what spurred the formation of the FM-ZB, according to Domínguez Santos, “FM-ZB was intended to coordinate with other indigenous organizations in opposition to official celebrations marking the Quincentary of Christopher Columbus’s arrival in the Americas” (2004:71).

During this same period of the early 1990s, technology was also evolving, particularly the use of e-mail and faxes. The FM-ZB was not unusual in quickly turning
to e-mail and faxes to coordinate political activities on both sides of the border. By 1992, the FM-ZB had put out a list of needs to the governor of Oaxaca, Diodoro Carrasco Altamirano, that included specific demands for public works and community services in places such as Santa Cruz Mixtepec, Juxtlahuaca; Tlacolula, Oaxaca; San Francisco Higos, Silacayoapan; as well as in Los Angeles and San Diego, California. The document included demands from the Valley of San Quintín, Baja California. The document that went out over e-mail, by fax, and which was published in *El Tequio*, (the newspaper of the FM-ZB/FIOB) read in part:

*C. Lic. Diodoro Carraso Altamirano*

*Constitutional Governor of the State of Oaxaca*

*City Hall*

*Oaxaca, Oaxaca*

*The representatives of the organizations that form the Zapotec-Mixtec Binational Front in California, USA, are addressing ourselves to the government of the state that you represent to demand your intervention and immediate resolution of the following:*

*Resolve the demands already set out by the government of the community of Santa Cruz Mixtepec, Juxtlahuaca, Oaxaca that consist of:*

*Construction of a dam and a network of distribution canals*

*Financial support to finish the municipal auditorium*

*Installation of a national telegraph office*

*Installation of a national telephone line. ...*

*...Tlacolula, Oaxaca Demands*

*Cancellation of the past municipal elections and convocation and realization of a popular referendum that will clean up and make transparent the recent results of municipal elections*
Financial and technical support for the potable water supply in order to meet the needs of the population of Tlacolula...

...San Fransisco Higos, Silacayoapan, Oaxaca demands:

that you find a peaceful and negotiated solution to the conflict of agrarian boundaries that it has with the community of San Mateo Tunuchi, Tecomaxtlaahuaca, Oaxaca....

...The organizations of the Mixtec-Zapoteco Binational Front, but particularly the Committee for Mixteco Social Unification (CSUM), demands the following for the Mixtecs in the Valley of San Quintín in Baja California Norte:

Respect for the rights of the labor union of Oaxacan agricultural workers and effective support on the part of state governments (Oaxaca and Baja California) and the federal government for the improvement of their material conditions of life.

In the 13 de Mayo (Colonia Vicente Guerrero) they need potable water and an elementary school.

In the Colonia “Nueva Era” (San Quintín) they need electricity, potable water, and an elementary school....

...We demand financial support for the formation of the Casa de la Cultura Oaxaqueña in Los Angeles, California under the direction and responsibility of the Oaxacan organizations in this area.

We demand that the government of the state give financial support for the purchase of instruments for the Mixtec philharmonic band that the Popular Mixtec Civic Committee is forming in the north county of San Diego.

We demand financial support for an annual basketball tournament “Benito Juárez” in the Los Angeles area...

...We demand the formation of a permanent bipartisan commission (Oaxacan state government and FM-ZB) to deal with the problems of immigrant Oaxacan workers including: human rights, labor rights, rights to housing and that this commission take place in a venue on the northern border (Tijuana-San Diego).

Los Angeles, California. December 7, 1992

“For the Respect of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples”

(Frente Mixteco-Zapoteco Binacional 1992).
In this single document sent out to a wide range of e-mail lists and faxed to state government offices in Oaxaca and Baja California, the FM-ZB pulled together a set of demands from multiple locations in two states in Mexico and one in the U.S. They used the communiqué as a way to set out a wide-ranging agenda that included public works, educations, culture, and sports and spoke both to the very specific needs of particular communities, but also articulated common cultural institutions such as a “Casa de la Cultura Oaxaqueño” (Oaxacan Cultural Center) in Los Angeles that would serve a pan-indigenous Oaxacan population. The document cites nine specific communities in Oaxaca, two specific neighborhoods or Colonias in San Quintín, two cities in California, and a series of broad demands related to indigenous Oaxacan workers in Baja California and in the state of California—simultaneously articulating the local, the regional, and the Binational with both very specific and far reaching demands. The integration of these three levels of ethnic identity and an organizing model of strategically interlacing these three levels of action has continued to characterize the organization as well as its representation of itself on the internet through its web site and through archived editions of its newspaper, El Tequío first published in 1991.

During the early and mid 1990s, the FIOB participated in a wide range of regional and international meetings that were crucial in helping the FM-ZB develop its networks. The exchange of information and construction of e-mail lists used for specific political pressuring campaigns were valuable resources generated at these kinds of meetings. The early 1990s were a historically strategic time for the thickening of networks of contacts. The importance of these kinds of networks not only in Latin America but connections between Mexican, U.S., Latin American, and European
networks of activists forged in the early 1990s became quickly evident with the public appearance of the EZLN on January 1, 1994. As a binational indigenous organization already networked throughout Latin America and the U.S., the FM-ZB became one of many support links for the EZLN in the campaign to stop the Mexican government from going to war in early 1994 and in subsequent solidarity and organizing efforts.

In 1994 after the Zapatista rebellion, FM-ZB mounted actions to pressure the Mexican government from using military force, joined in hunger strikes and demonstrations in front of the offices of Mexican consulates and other government offices in California (Bacon 2002). The use of e-mail lists and faxes was crucial in these efforts, both in the U.S. and in Mexico. In September of 1994, the FM-ZB held its second binational assembly in Tijuana, Baja California where the principle objective was to change the name of the organization. At that assembly the name was changed to the Frente Indígena Oaxaqueño Binacional (FIOB, Oaxacan Indigenous Binational Front) reflecting the integration of a wide range of Oaxacan indigenous ethnic groups into the organization. It also officially marked the articulation of a pan-Oaxacan indigenous identity category.

In 1997, the FIOB inaugurated its own web page. It was put together in Mexico City with the support of several organizations including LANETA, Oxfam America, and el Consejo de la Raza. While FIOB had previously been dependent on extensive use of e-mail lists, faxes, radio, and word of mouth to publicize their events, demands, and political actions, having a web page added another dimension to how they could reach a wider public. In an explanation of why the web page is important, the FIOB states: “this
technological advance of globalization is a very important instrument of struggle that can be very effective for an organization like ours because we can be seen and read about from any part of our Mother Earth (Centro Binacional para el Desarollo Indígena Oaxaqueño).

The FIOB website has proven to be important in generating pressure from the U.S. and Mexico when FIOB activists have been threatened, detained, and jailed. In August of 1998, Professor Romualdo Juan Gutiérrez Cortés—a joint FIOB-PRD candidate for local congressional representative for the twenty-first district of Juxtlahuaca/Silacayoapan in the Mixteca region—defeated the ruling party candidate (PRI) for the first time ever. After recognition of his victory, FIOB leaders suffered from harassment in the Mixteca region of Oaxaca. Letters written demanding that the harassment stop that were sent to the Oaxaca state government from the U.S. Canada, Europe, and Asia are credited by the FIOB with helping to protect leaders (Centro Binacional para el Desarollo Indígena Oaxaqueño). In 2002, after finishing his term as state representative, Professor Romualdo Gutiérrez Cortés was arrested and jailed in Oaxaca on charges of armed robbery. An internal split in the organization in 2001 resulted in the disavowal of former FIOB general coordinator Arturo Pimental Salas after he refused to step down from his coordinator position after becoming a candidate for state representative. The FIOB’s statutes stipulate that anyone holding an official FIOB position must resign if they become a formal political candidate with a political party (Domínguez Santos 2004:75). Refusing to resign, Pimental sought revenge. The arrest of Gutiérrez Cortés was a part of this pattern of revenge. A wildfire e-mail campaign run
from the FIOB web page as well as through a wide range of lists resulted in the liberation of Gutiérrez Cortés and dismissal of all charges (El Tequio 2002).

FIOB organizers also used internet communication to organize a campaign in 2000 in the state of California to get indigenous migrants to register in the U.S. census as both indigenous and Hispanic. An important part of the campaign was to provide assistance in the necessary languages (Zapotec, Mixtec, Mixe, Triqui, and others) for people to fill out their census forms in order to count not only as Latino, but also as indigenous. By building up a presence of indigenous Mexicans through the official forum of the census FIOB organizers hoped to be able to use the numbers to pressure for public resources. As stated in the FIOB newsletter:

> It is important to write or mark “Indigenous” or “Mixtec” or “Zapotec” or “Triqui” on the census form. Having a government statistic of the number of indigenous peoples who are living in this country (the U.S.) is important and will benefit us all in allowing us to solicit government services to meet the specific needs we have as indigenous peoples (Vásquez 1999).

With this campaign, FIOB was bringing pan-ethnic identity to another level by seeking to establish a public and official profile for Oaxacan indigenous migrants within the broader racial/ethnic category of Latino. The mechanics of making this happen, however, involve the mobilization of specific ethnicities through language. Some Mixtec speakers could only fill out their census forms to register as “Hispanic American Indians” if they had Mixtec-specific translation that helped them to fill out the form in Spanish.
In March of 2005, at its fifth Binational assembly held in Oaxaca, 120 voting delegates from California, Baja California del Norte, and Oaxaca voted to change the name of the FIOB to reflect a wider pan-ethnic vision. Dropping the “Oaxacan” part of its name, the FIOB retained its initials but changed its name to Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales (Binational Front of Indigenous Organizations, FIOB). The leadership now has Purepecha representation from Michoacán. In a press release, following the March assembly, FIOB articulated its broader indigenous membership:

The Frente Indígena Oaxaqueño Binacional (Oaxacan Indigenous Binational Front or FIOB), founded fourteen years ago, has undergone changes in its membership in the past two years. The organization has expanded with the addition of new indigenous members, mainly migrants living in Baja California (Mexico) and California (United States), who come from the states of Guerrero, Hidalgo, and Michoacán, among others. These people have recognized our founding documents, our mission, our vision and our strategies for struggle to ensure a better future for our migrant and non-migrant communities on both sides of the border (FIOB 2005).

With more than 20,000 members, the FIOB also ratified a new mission statement as follows: “to contribute to the development and self-determination of the migrant and non-migrant indigenous communities, as well as struggle for the defense of human rights with justice and gender equity at the binational level” (Cano 2005). With this statement and the name change, FIOB solidified its organizational definition of ethnic identity at a
binational or transborder level to “migrant and non-migrant indigenous peoples/communities” which includes “Mexico” as an implicit part of the ethnic label.

2006 Guelaguetza, comment o use of web page e-mail to organize cultural events, such as FIOB Guelaguetza

**Conclusions**

In its sixteen years of existence, the FIOB has consistently and successfully combined a transborder approach to organizing with the recognition of indigenous ethnic identity as simultaneously rooted in communities, in specific ethnic/languages groups, in the state of Oaxaca, and now from throughout Mexico. The virtual transborder organizing of the FIOB has matched this profile first through e-mail and fax campaigns and then through its web site and print and web-based newsletter, *El Tequio*. FIOB activists have insisted on the importance of being able to scale ethnic identity up or down and have insisted, in fact, on the importance of projecting indigenous ethnic identity simultaneously across multiple levels and borders. Through their digital productions that invoke both the rootedness of place and place-based histories and transborder and transhistorical presences, the indigenous activists in FIOB have provided their own theories of contemporary indigenous Mexican ethnicity. If we closely examine the ways the FIOB has generated its identity in digital form, we can learn much about indigenous models of ethnicity.

While social scientists have been busy debating whether or not indigenous ethnicities have moved from the local level to the regional level to the transnational level, indigenous intellectuals such as Rufino Domínguez Santos from FIOB have set out in
practice their own definitions. Rather than labeling their efforts as either “essentialist” or “constructionist” I suggest that we embrace their examples of geographical, spatial, and historical multi-sitedness and simultaneity and let them speak for themselves.

The digital materials and networks constructed by FIOB activists are a tangible part of transborder lives that both embrace and challenge dominant models of globalization. Place and geographically-specific elements of FIOB ethnic identities insist on a particular location as one part of the cultural memory of ethnic identity production. FIOB activists express this through their continued presence in and representation of demands from specific local communities in Oaxaca where migrants are from as well as specific communities in Baja California and California where they have settled. Such community-local specificity works against some of the cultural homogenization that is a part of the branding phenomenon of globalization—loyalty to a brand, not a specific product at a global level. At the same time, FIOB activists have incorporated pan-ethnically specific levels of ethnicity-- i.e. “Zapotec” and “Mixtec”—and pan indigenous levels of ethnicity—“indigenous peoples” into their political and cultural strategies. Pan-ethnic and pan-indigenous levels of identity suggest a certain level of shared understandings, values, and goals with others who are not from the same community, the same region, or even the same state of Mexico, but who are struggling around shared issues in the U.S. and in Mexico.

Just as indigenous migrants such as the Zapotec and Mixtec documented here crossed many borders that they did not invent (racial, ethnic, class, state, national, legal, gender), their multi-layered approach to ethnic identity deployment suggests the
possibility of retaking these boundaries and using them effectively for concrete political, cultural, and economic objectives as well as resituating themselves in histories.

If we return to Linda Tuhiwa Smith’s call for indigenous research projects, the digital materials created by FIOB offer ready examples of “survival of peoples, cultures, and languages; the struggle to become self-determining, the need to take back control of our destinies” in a transborder and globalized context (Smith 1999:142).

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