

Language, Culture and Identity: The place of Youth

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From Canada to Argentina, from the great plains of the United States, the dry landscapes of Mexico all the way to the lush rainforests of Brazil, the American continent is one of great diversity, and of great civilizations. It has been inhabited for thousands of years, yet, for the past 500 years or so it has been the theater of great genocide and the death of its people, its native communities, for the profit of newcomers, from European settlers to capitalist multinationals. Indigenous nations and communities are being oppressed, marginalized, criminalized even in some parts of the continent. As Daiara Tukano, an activist indigenous Brazilian searcher and radio host, declared recently, native people are criminalized by the media and society and it's a constant fight against stereotypes and marginalization¹. But who are the young voices of the 21st century fighting for the revival of their cultural heritage and traditional knowledge? In this paper we will discover the journey of young activists. Representatives of a new generation, they've been the spectators of many discriminations, listeners of the scars of the elders, and witnesses of the rise of minority movements since the second half of the 20th century. They are the empowered children of women's right fights, democracy advocates, student's riots, LBTQ+ recognition, and people of color's marches for a more equal and diverse society. But in spite of many accomplishments over the past decades, the battle between the ethnosphere and modern society is stronger than ever. As Wade Davis, a Canadian anthropologist specialized in the study of cultures around the world and in native communities, defines it: « Ethnosphere means the sum total of all thoughts and intuitions, myths and beliefs, ideas and inspirations brought into being by the human imagination since the dawn of consciousness. It encompasses the wealth of human diversity and all that traditional cultures have to teach about different ways of living and thinking.² » But according to his investigations, under the influence of movements like imperialism seeking to promote a one-size-fits-all way of life, cultural uniformization is threatening that diversity and the erosion of the ethnosphere will diminish all humanity. Cultural diversity not only reflects different cultures and values but also different heritages, different environments and different practices that all together form humanity. Indeed, there are humongous issues rising from the growth of technology and uniformization of the values, languages, beliefs, cultural references (by that I mean the influence of North American culture in movies, series, music, art, fashion, and general references, in a society that wants to

¹ Daiara Tukano was a key speaker at Paris' annual Day of Solidarity with Indigenous Communities (October 2019).

² Davis, W. (2007). *Light at the edge of the world: a journey through the realm of vanishing cultures*.

consider culture as a product like any other³). The main issue being disconnection. A disconnected society is the perfect base for consumerism, for cultivating individual needs and an anthropocentric society, but unfortunately it also leads to a feeling of being lost, of loneliness. It creates the base for a dysfunctional society which should, by essence, be about social interactions, not economic and virtual ones. What am I here for? What's my place in the world? Where do I fit? All questions we tend to ask ourselves more and more today. Just as destructive as feeling lost, the fear of "the other" is also a result of disconnectedness. Differences are highlighted, almost criminalized in a society where "fitting" more than "existing" is the aspiration and when the individual is put at the center of everything we tend to feel almighty, all-knowing, thus reinforcing the fear of the unknown, the "difference" or more the "anomaly" that would challenge our might as powerful individuals. In my opinion the reason behind most discriminations today are not directed to the minorities, but more to the ones discriminating who can't bear the thought of reevaluating their power, of admitting, more than not being all-knowing, not being at the center of the world. Wouldn't, then, the fear of the other just be a result of the fear of feeling lost? And wouldn't that all be eventually linked to disconnectedness?

If, as noted Mexican author Nestor Garcia Conclini⁴ : « The cultural wealth that is appreciated is that of dominant groups », activist and hip-hop artist Xiuhtezcatl Tonatiuh Martinez is one of these rising youth voices advocating for the importance of traditional knowledge through his work and his environmental activism as Youth Director of Earth Guardians, an organization for youth empowerment in regards to finding solutions to the world's most pressing current issues. The 19-year-old artist was raised in the Aztec tradition in Colorado, USA and started activism at the age of 6 when he realized the contradictions between the mainstream culture of profit and disruptive relationships and his indigenous culture transmitted by his father that evolved around connection to nature and pride of the traditional teachings. Aside from environmental change he advocates for reconnection and youth empowerment, and he is not alone. He's part of a growing voice raising awareness on the failure of our current model and the need to reconnect and celebrate cultural differences and community spirit. Through hip-hop, a movement that above music is also about social justice and expressing society's issues, he shares a message both dramatic and empowering. It's a wakeup call, a call to action for youth all around the world to take back their narrative and take a stand. In his single entitled « Young », he addresses most of the issues young leaders and minorities are bringing up today starting with facing discriminations and stereotypes, or as he refers to them « the

³ Rabassó, C.A., Rabassó, F. J., (2015). *Introduction au management interculturel. Pour une gestion de la diversité*. 2ème édition, Paris: Ellipses. (p.165-170).

⁴ Garcia, N., 2002 (1982), *Las Culturas Populares en el Capitalismo*. Editorial Grijalbo. Mexico.

hatred of the world » and how the next generation's wish is to « watch the walls crumble » while staying positive about the future. His message of positivity also echoes Rhummanee Hang's, another young minority artist and performer. As a second generation Khmai American person of color she had to face a lot of negativity growing up, as she recalls in her poem « Tomorrow is Today » during Bioneers Annual Summit 2015⁵. While she too talks about how many people wanted to see her fall and prove a stereotype, she had « dreams that are bigger ». Quoting Gandhi, she declared: « You need to be the change you wish to see in the world. [...] Change starts with me; change starts with us. We are the ones we've been waiting for. Tomorrow is today. ».

The rise of youth is inspiring and empowering, and some voices recognized the need to spread that and help youth around the world and in communities connect and reconnect to build a new network of support, solidarity, exchange, and learning. While some of the voices featured in this paper and on stages worldwide all-year round have found something to dream for, most youth don't chase anything for they are not being taught the importance of engagement or of the issues at stake, or not given the proper tools. Xiuhtezcatl sings that « When the test scores, seem to mean more/ Than feeling alive/ And finding out what you breathe for/ (I feel) something's missing/ Our generation should dream more », and the feeling is shared among his peers. Keynote speaker Jessica Rimington, then aged 18, decided in 2004 to take a year off from school and pursue her dream of creating such a network of students around the world based on enhancing education towards more empowering, global and empathetic curriculums. She created the One World Youth Project non-profit that since 2004 has been evolving and growing in more than 19 countries connecting youth around the world in middle and high schools and giving university's students the tools to teach a more global curriculum⁶ or get data from vetted source to support activism and studies.

Jessica Rimington also advocates, along with peer activists Thenmozhi Soundararajan and Amalia Anderson, against the biased way media portrays people of color and minorities. According to her, this bias doesn't only affect the perception society has of these communities, but also the way these communities function in the inside : « there is a need to take back the media in addition to taking back the communities to reach true liberation of these communities⁷ ».

Amalia Anderson, an indigenous lawyer and activist focuses her work around the impact of development on culture and on working with indigenous youth to make them see the importance of preserving and nurturing traditional knowledge against the colonialist media power that is a force

⁵ Rhummanee Hang "Tomorrow is Today", poem. Bioneers Annual Conference 2015.

⁶ <https://oneworldeducation.org/one-world-program-0>

⁷ Harvy, N., (2016). *Making Tomorrow Today: The Power of Youth* / Amalia Anderson. Bioneers: Revolution from the Heart of Nature. Podcast.

taking the stories from the communities.

A way she started to improve knowledge transmission from the elders onto the new generation was through video tapping speakers as she realized that the transmission in the sessions was limited to the people who could come to the speakers and there is a need to spread traditional knowledge to a wider audience. She started to work with a local school to teach students how to realize video history interviews to work and develop stories with elders and tape these exchanges in a way that could benefit others. In the work, the elders were seen as a library and each time an elder dies a library burns and really that's at the core of her current work to preserve the knowledge and empower communities.

There's a disconnect between the stories they learn and why they're not learning these stories from their community. One key element is the challenge between the way these stories are traditionally being taught in the communities (oral mostly) and the more glamorous hi-tech medias. It is creating a disconnect from the importance of the knowledge and values that make these communities who they are, as, for indigenous people and other minorities, traditional history and traditional knowledge is a center piece of their identity. As Anderson says, « maintaining this knowledge is necessary to maintain the balance needed to preserve the country and the world for the next generation as indigenous people are the caretakers of the world ». It once again emphasizes the relationship between cultural heritage, and human diversity with the uniqueness of environments and bioregions around the globe.

More than indigenous youth, most young people of color today are being told their stories to them from people outside their communities.

Thenmozhi Soundararajan is a second generation untouchable Tamil Dalit-American woman. She is a filmmaker and grassroots media activist that has been featured in many magazines for her activism and youth empowerment work. She says that even though cameras have traditionally been mostly wielded by white men, it is possible for marginalized groups to take back their stories, in their own ways.

That's why in 2001, with five other women, she started a small organization in her hometown of Oakland : Third World Majority⁸. Her goal was to provide training in digital storytelling to traditionally disenfranchised groups to give them the tools to take back their narrative. Tell It Like It Is⁹, one of the organization's first major project, is a youth-storytelling workshop project that took place for the first time in 2003 in Oakland and was reconducted a year later in Hollywood, California, where 30 teams got together for the workshop as a statement against the mainstream media industry.

⁸ Benavente, J., Richardson, R. L., (2011). *Cultural organizing: Experiences at the intersection of art and activism*. Washington, D.C.: Animating Democracy.

⁹ Inglis, T. (2003). "Activist filmmakers offer tools for storytelling". The Chronicle. SF Gate.

The issue of identity and traditional wisdom is not only restricted to the United States; it is a global issue. Clarissa Da Silva, a high school student and representative for Jeunesse Autochtone de Guyane (Indigenous Youth of French Guyana), knows this very well. Although the French government has never recognized the rights of the indigenous communities on its territories, Clarissa is part of this new generation in need of reconnecting with her traditions and elders.¹⁰ As a young Kali'na artist she puts the question of identity and culture at the center of her work, something very important to her now after what her family had to go through. Her parents' generation was that of a forced occidental education, being forced to go to the coastal cities to stay in so called « Indian American residential schools » and thus skip the chance to receive the traditional education and knowledge. In these schools they received a catholic european education. She recalled, « une évangélisation, une éducation à la française, il fallait chanter La Marseillaise, les langues autochtones étaient interdites. [...] Je pense, qu'inconsciemment, ma mère regardait ce processus selon lequel il ne fallait pas parler notre langue, donc nous avons grandi avec ça, nous ne parlons pas la langue Kali'na. ». Now, her generation is working on rebuilding that connection but it's a long and difficult process as the traditional and modern worlds are very different from one another. The relationship they have with the tradition is quite complicated, but it's also as strong statement of the need to reclaim their identity. This process of identity claim is strongly linked to the learning and preservation of cultural diversity and the survival of traditional knowledge and history, a feeling shared by all the youth activists mentioned in this paper.

With that in mind, our future might just lie in reconnecting, and the acknowledgment of our diversity as sacred being on this planet¹¹, not only for disenfranchised and indigenous groups, but for every human being on this planet. Because if « Tomorrow is today » in the sense that the need for change is now, *Yesterday needs to be Tomorrow* for we can only build and evolve correctly if we root ourselves deeply enough and learn from our environment and ancestral knowledge that have proven efficiency over time, and brings the diversity that makes our planet so unique and beautiful. As declared Xiuhtezcatl Martinez in 2016, "This is the moment where we decide what kind of legacy we are going to leave behind for future generations."¹²

¹⁰ Prat, C., (Octobre 2019). *Vanessa Joseph et Clarissa Da Silva, De la Jeunesse Autchtone de Guyane : A la recherche de notre identité*. Annual Day of Solidarity, CSIA-nitassinan. Transcript.

¹¹ Davis, W., (2009). *The wayfinders: why ancient wisdom matters in the modern world*. House of Anansi.

¹² Worland, J., (October 2016). *"These Kids Are Suing the Federal Government to Demand Climate Action. They Just Won an Important Victory"*. TIME magazine

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