

# Children of Oaxacan Zapotec

*Immigrants in the United States*

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## Abstract

This article presents an analysis of the experiences, ideas, and social processes that shape the construction of ethnic and racial identities of the second-generation Zapotecs. This work concentrates on the experiences of the children of Yalálag Zapotec immigrants, henceforth, the second-generation Yalaltecos. The discussion that follows is divided into two sections. The first one explores second-generation Yalaltecos' perceptions of ethnic identity based on their identification with two national identities: the Mexican and the American. The second section focus on the construction of identity as it refers to ethnicity and race. A major argument leads the discussion here: while second-generation Yalaltecos are becoming Americans by being Mexican Americans, their sense of identification as Yalálag Zapotecs or Yalaltecos is the weakest among the others: Mexican, American, Mexican American, and Oaxaqueños.

**Key words:** Yalálag Zapotec immigrants, Mexican Americans, First & Second Generation Immigration

## Resumen

### Los hijos de los inmigrantes zapotecos de Oaxaca en Estados Unidos

En este artículo se presenta un análisis de las experiencias, las ideas y los procesos sociales que dan forma a la construcción de las identidades étnicas y raciales de los zapotecas de segunda generación. Este trabajo se centra en las experiencias de los hijos de los inmigrantes zapotecos Yalálag, los Yalaltecos de segunda generación. La discusión se divide en dos secciones. La primera

analiza la segunda generación de percepciones Yalaltecos de la identidad étnica con base en su identificación con dos identidades nacionales: la mexicana y la estadounidense. La segunda sección se centra en la construcción de identidad ya que se refiere a la etnicidad y la raza. Un argumento importante prevalece en el debate: mientras que la segunda generación de Yalaltecos se está convirtiendo en estadounidense por estar formada por estadounidenses de origen mexicano, su identificación como zapotecas Yalálag o Yalaltecos es la más débil entre las demás: mexicana, americana, mexicano americana y oaxaqueña.

**Palabras clave:** Zapotecos Yalaltecos, México americanos, Migración de Primera y Segunda Generaciones

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Various scholars have argued that once immigrants decide to settle into a new country, they become more conscious about their own ethnic distinctiveness and culture because they reinforce their new identity as foreigners and immigrants.<sup>1</sup> The Zapotec immigrants, who live in California, have developed a strong sense of identity as indigenous Mexican migrants, Mexicans, Latinos and Oaxaqueños.<sup>2</sup> For them, culture continues to be a major source of identity and remains as a crucial vehicle for bringing the Zapotec people together in the United States. In contrast to the experiences of Zapotec immigrants, the children of Zapotecs born in the United States have not developed nor experience a homogenous identity based on their indigenous ethnicity and experiences in a new land. They are engaged with and responding to different social, political, and cultural concerns that shape their sense of identity in new and different ways.

The descendants of Zapotec immigrants in California –the second-generation– are already in the United States and the questions of identity have become crucial for them. Up to now, we do not know how the second-

1. A significant body of social science research focuses on the social construction of ethnic identity of the immigrants in the United States (Adler 2004; Faist 2000; Glick Schiller *et al.* 1992; Goldring 1992; Hall 1997; Hylland 2002; Kearney 1995, 1999; Levitt 2001; Margolis 1994; Oblore 1999; Tsuda 2003; Waters 2001, 1990).

2. For studies of Zapotec migration in the United States see: Cruz-Manjarrez (2013); Fox and Salgado-Rivera (2004); Hulshof (1991); Klaver (1997); Stephen (2007).

generation Zapotecs imagine themselves and what kinds of affiliations these children choose to identify with. Moreover, it is not even clear to the second generation what the referents of self-identification are available for them. The identity formation process among Zapotecs born in the United States, henceforth the second-generation Zapotecs,<sup>3</sup> is new, different, and complex. In contrast to the migrant experiences, the experience of self-identification occurs in the middle of social pressures to assimilate into the American and Mexican mainstream. In addition, this process presents the second-generation Zapotecs with a never-ending experience of social oppression and various forms of racism that affect their lives and weaken their indigenous ethnicity.

In this article, I present an analysis of the experiences, ideas, and social processes that shape the construction of ethnic and racial identities of the second-generation Zapotecs. This work concentrates on the experiences of the children of Yalálag Zapotec immigrants, henceforth, the second-generation Yalaltecos. The discussion that follows is divided into two sections. In the first, I explore second-generation Yalaltecos' perceptions of ethnic identity based on their identification with two national identities: the Mexican and the American. In the second section, I focus on the construction of identity as it refers to ethnicity and race. A major argument leads the discussion here: while second-generation Yalaltecos are becoming Americans by being Mexican Americans, their sense of identification as Yalálag Zapotecs or Yalaltecos is the weakest among the others: Mexican, American, Mexican American, and Oaxaqueños.

## **Formulations of Ethnic Identity:**

*the Mexican, the Mexican American, and the american identifications*

Current debates on the second generation (Back 1995; Gross 1996; Portes 1996; Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Waters 1990; Levitt and Waters 2002) point out that members of the new second generation position themselves in relation to more than one national identity and that their experiences of incorporation in the United States are significantly different from the experience of the descendants of earlier immigrants. In the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Jews, Italians, Greeks, Irish, and Germans were forced to become Americans (Perlmann and Waldinger 1999). Their process of assimilation into the American mainstream was an attempt to homogenize

3. I use the term second generation Yalálag Zapotecs because it refers to the descendants of Zapotec immigrants who are born in the United States. I consider that this term is not ambiguous. Its fixed meaning describes the ethnic identity of these Zapotec adolescents and acknowledges their cultural, linguistic and historical affiliations.

them into an American common cultural life and make them leave behind their particular cultures and histories (Park and Burges 1921/1969:735 cited in Rumabut 1999:185). Others were thought to be unable to assimilate because of “their anti-social behavior(s)” and racial and ethnic characteristics (Ueda 1992:20; Sanchez 1993:260). In contrast, contemporary members of the second generation grow up in a multicultural society that allows them to affiliate with more than one ethnicity and to recognize the hybrid nature of their identity.

In the case of the second-generation Yalaltecos, however, it is not evident what referents of ethnic identification are available for them and what kinds of experiences inform their sense of identity. In Mexico, the Zapotecs are culturally, linguistically, and historically different from the rest of the Mexican mestizo population and do not identify strongly with the dominant national culture. In the United States, nonetheless, Zapotecs find themselves changing from former minority “ethnic” status to “ethnic” nationals (Cruz-Manjarrez, 2006), that is, indigenous Mexican migrants (Fox and Rivera Salgado, 2004). As for the descendants of Zapotec immigrants, they are U.S. born citizens and claim strong identification as American citizens of Mexican ancestry. At the same time, they are unsure to assert their Yalálag Zapotec identity because they feel they are not competent enough with Zapotec culture.

In this context, for second-generation Yalaltecos, the act of claiming an ethnic identity constitutes a new type of social process. Defining their sense of ethnic identity derives from their recognition that they are positioned to more than one ethnic group and that they are culturally and socially competent in the Yalálag Zapotec, Mexican, and American cultures. The construction of their ethnic identity does not result from a free combination of these multiple selves, but is inevitably shaped by processes from above and below. From above, second-generation Yalaltecos understand their sense of identity through the prism of historical relations between Mexican *mestizos* and indigenous people; and the hegemonic discourses of their indigenous identity. From below, native cultural practices, daily contact and experiences with other peoples, and the opinions voiced by parents, relatives, Zapotec community members, and peers influence their perspective.

In Los Angeles, second-generation Yalaltecos affiliate with more than one identity. Most of them recognize an identity as Yalaltecos, when they mention that their blood remains purely Yalalteco. But, this is usually linked, sublimated, or even superseded by two types of national identities: the

American and the Mexican. When reflecting on the question “how would you describe yourself?” remarks such as the following exchange between four siblings were typical and representative of most interviewees:

S: Well, I am Mexican American. But I am not completely Mexican because I was born in the U.S. I am saying this because I am very different from Mexicans from Mexico, including my parents and Mexican friends. I feel like being both. But, I feel more Mexican than American [Female informant, 27 years old].

D: Well, I consider myself an American citizen. But, I am a Yalálag Zapotec too because my parents are Zapotec from Yalálag. Why I should not consider myself Zapotec? [Male informant, 14 years old].

J: I feel that I am Mexican, Zapotec, and American. But, to tell the truth I feel more Mexican and Zapotec [Male informant, 11 years old].

L: I agree with my brother. I am Mexican, American, and Zapotec too. Although I should say that I do not feel that I am very knowledgeable of Zapotec culture and their traditions. Living in Los Angeles makes things quite different. What I mean is that the people from the place where my parents come from are different from me. In this sense, I could not say that I am really a Zapotec [Female informant, 20 years old].

In these responses, ethnicity extends beyond one affiliation because second-generation Yalaltecos use all these ethnic labels and referents to define the boundaries of their different identities. Also, they choose all these ethnic labels to indicate their sense of belonging to different ethnic groups and to highlight that their perceptions of a minority identity in the United States combines mixed feelings and contradictory ideas that shape the construction of ethnic identity of second-generation Yalaltecos as Mexican and American.

In the U.S. context, second-generation Yalaltecos identify as Mexicans and as Mexican Americans for various reasons. First of all, according to the U.S. system of ethnic classification, they identify as Mexican—because they are ethnically classified as Hispanic of Mexican origin. In the United States, Latinos or Hispanics constitute an ethnic group, not a race. They are persons of Cuba, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Central and South America or “other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race” (Ennis, Ríos-Vargas, and Albert, 2011). Second, they assert an Oaxaqueño identity because this is the regional identification for indigenous Oaxacan migrants and their children in California, and they belong to the larger Oaxacan community in Los Angeles. Third, they also claim a Yalaltec identity because they

define themselves as persons of Yalálag Zapotec ancestry. However, as expressed in their responses, they identify with all these identities, but they do not feel equally competent in Yalalteco, Mexican, and American cultures. Fourthly, during the course of my research, my social location as Mexican defined the context in which I asked the second-generation Yalaltecos to identify themselves. They described their sense of identity relative to my identity as Mexican.

In my conversations with second-generation Yalaltecos, it was important for them to define our commonalities as Mexicans. This fact became crucial for understanding why these adolescents continuously reframed their responses and how they redefined their sense of identity as Mexican or Mexican American as the interviews developed. In all our meetings, these teenagers identified me as Mexican. My Mexicanness was important for them to establish a common affiliation because, at some point, they collected “me and them” together as Mexicans. When their first response was, “we are Mexicans,” I then challenged them to describe in which ways we were distinct. In response, they emphasized the identities I did not have: “well, we are Mexican Americans because we were born in the United States. And, we are Oaxaqueños (people from Oaxaca, Mexico) because we belong to the Oaxacan community” a teenage girl replied [16 years old].

There are important differences in the definition of who is Mexican or who is a Mexican American among these adolescents. Second-generation Yalaltecos, who were born in Mexico and raised in the United States, namely, the 1.5 generation, are more inclined to assert their ethnic identity as Mexican. In contrast, second-generation Yalaltecos, who were born in the United States, claim a Mexican American identity. Carlos, a member of the 1.5 generation who has lived in the United States for 12 years, and Antonio, a second-generation Yalalteco teen, illustrate this point:

C: There is no doubt. I define myself as Mexican. I was born in Mexico. I would say that I am a little bit American because I have learned to be American and my way of thinking and doing things is in certain respects American. But, my personality, my culture, and origin are Mexican. Also I have some memories of my childhood. In contrast, I think that those teenagers, who were born in the U.S. and have not been in Mexico, are Mexican-American.

A: I consider myself American because I was born in the U.S. I think that those adolescents, who were born in Mexico, are Mexican. Do not get me wrong. I am not discriminating against them. But it is a fact that being born in Mexico makes them behave and think differently.

It is important to note that these second-generation Yalaltecos do not identify as Mexican American solely on the basis of their own identification with the Mexican American community, but also on the opinions voiced by their parents and Yalálag Zapotec relatives. Many second-generation Yalaltecos said that their parents usually tell them that they are Mexican Americans. Rosa, who is second-generation Yalalteco, described this: “My parents always tell me that I should keep in mind that we are Mexicans. However, they always call me Chicana or *gringa* because they say that I was born in the States”. Other second-generation Yalaltecos described similar experiences and indicated that their relatives in Yalálag, like their parents, call them Mexican Americans or *pochos* because of their noticeable American ways. Rosa said that when she visits her cousins in Yalálag or Mexico City, they make fun of her because her Spanish is a “little bit twisted”. They also recognized significant differences in her way of talking, walking, dressing, eating, and thinking.

By comparing the way of life between Yalálag and Los Angeles and observing social exchanges between second-generation Yalaltecos and Yalálag Zapotec non-immigrants, I became aware of the differences in the performance of ethnic identity and the social perceptions that inform the identity of second-generation Yalaltecos as Mexican Americans. For example, in 2003, I traveled to Yalálag with six second-generation Yalaltecos and their families for the Christmas celebration. I soon realized that second-generation Yalaltecos do not see themselves as a part of the community of Yalálag in Mexico. It is hard for them to adapt rapidly to the style of life, weather conditions, “bugs”, food, and, in particular, the social dynamics of their relatives. On one occasion, a female teenager began to complain about the food, the water, and the mosquitoes. Another one asked her mother if it would be possible to depart earlier for Los Angeles because she missed her home, food, and friends. On another occasion, I asked other visiting second-generation Yalaltecos if they were having a good time in the village. They said to me that they were already bored because life in Yalálag was too slow, quiet, and monotonous. When I asked them if they could live there, they said that they could visit their families every other year, but never could live in that little village because they would not know what to do and because they already have plans, friends, and activities in Los Angeles.

The use of Spanish and English, not Zapotec, has much to do with why the local people of Yalálag perceive second-generation Yalaltecos as Mexican American and why second-generation Yalaltecos do not consider themselves Zapotecs. In Yalálag, switching between Spanish and English

signals the identity of a Mexican American. Second-generation Yalaltecos usually speak to their parents in Spanish, and they cannot fully participate in family conversations or communicate with their older relatives because they have not been taught the language of their parents. When reflecting on their identities as Mexican Americans, most second-generation Yalaltecos tend to disregard their Zapotec roots because they do not speak Zapotec—their mother language—and their identity is mixed.

In order to understand how and why they define their Mexican American identity, I asked them to talk about the cultural practices, ethnic values, and social behaviors that represent their Mexican American roots. Two of the most influential aspects that inform second-generation Yalaltecos' sense of identity as Mexican Americans were: first, the fact that they learn Spanish as a first language. Second, they are continuously exposed to Mexican mainstream culture in the United States. However, when I asked them to describe what they would say if a European or an Australian asked them about their ethnicity and culture, one 19-year-old girl, Alma, replied: "In the United States, I would say that I am Mexican American because this is my community. However, when I travel abroad, I usually say that I am American although people do not believe it". Although she explained that while traveling she feels more American than Mexican, because she has to show her American passport, she would definitively describe her ethnicity and culture in term of her parents' culture, Oaxacan and Zapotec, and not in terms of her Mexican or American identities. She further elaborated on what she thinks is representative of this culture:

I would tell them about my family's origin, our music, that is, the *jarabes Yalaltecos* (Zapotec social dances), and the Zapotec brass band. I will describe [for] them the fiestas that are organized in Los Angeles such as the *bailes* (patron saint celebrations) and the celebration of the Day of the Dead. I would tell them that my parents have their own language and come from a village that is located in Mexico. I may explain about the process of making tortillas and preparing *barbacoa* (traditional dish made of lamb, chili, and avocado leaves).

Although most second-generation Yalaltecos said that they feel Mexican American because they were born in the United States and identify with other U.S.-born Mexicans, they also cannot identify simply as American because this refers to White Americans. The ways they are perceived in the United States reinforces their sense of identity as Mexican Americans. According to my interviewees, all kinds of Americans think they look Mexican. Although many mentioned that they are sometimes characterized as Central Americans, Americans primarily assumed them to be Mexicans because of their physical appearance.



The claiming of an American identity among second-generation Yalaltecos seems to be not solely based on their place of birth and their U.S. citizenship. These adolescents emphasize their identity as Americans, by pointing out social and cultural differences between themselves and Mexican immigrants. But, as Mexican Americans, they also remark differences between themselves and Black Americans, Asian Americans, Central Americans, Native Americans, and White Americans. When they travel to Mexico or abroad, they become more aware of their Americanness because they have an American birth certificate, hold American passports, and behave according to American customs. In particular, in the Mexican context, the second-generation Yalaltecos recognize that being exposed to the American way of life and learning how to live in the United States has Americanized them. Two teenagers, who talked about their assimilation into the American mainstream, shared these comments:

C: I feel American because I speak English. Also, I guess that it is the way I dress and my way of thinking. I think that we [the second-generation Yalálag Zapotecs] are more individualistic and materialist. I feel that we are more open-minded than our parents. We have fewer prejudices about certain things. What I eat also makes me feel American. I eat hamburgers, pizza, Taco Bell, all kinds of fast food [Male, 17 years old].

G: I would not say that I am 100 percent American because I am not white. I would say that “I am American” because I was born in the U.S. and when it is convenient. In reality, I am just 50 percent American. Look, at school I feel more American because of the opportunities I have, and when I use my social security number to apply for college. I guess that speaking English makes me feel American, and when I speak *Spanglish* [Female, 17 years old].

The characteristics that distinguish them as Americans not only reflect the way they construct their American identity but also indicate that being “American” is behaving “American”. From a second-generation’s perspective, being American has two major meanings. First, it entails acting American, i.e. speaking English, adopting American fashions. Second, it means behaving and thinking according to American customs. For Yalálag Zapotec immigrants, however, acting American means acting like Mexican Americans. In this sense, the second-generation Yalaltecos said that they are aware that they are not like White Americans or other Americans. Rather, the role model for them is that of the Mexican American.

Yalálag Zapotec immigrants agree with the American-born members of their community. By adopting these perspectives, they reinforce the idea that

their children are Americanized. An immigrant man commented during an interview with his two sons: “Look, those adolescents, who are born in the United States, are somehow different from us. They are more American. In some respects, we are similar. But, they are more open-minded. They are different. And of course, they are better educated and have a lot of opportunities in this country”. Indeed, Yalálag Zapotec immigrants recognize that second-generation Yalaltecos have adopted different ways of thinking and behaving and to great extent have learned American values, norms, and ideas. They also acknowledge that being an American implies having access to the American citizenship, the civil rights, and other “opportunities”: education, health insurance, and jobs that go with it.

Finally, for second-generation Yalaltecos, being Mexican American signals a specific type of Americanness. They understand that White American identity represents the hegemonic discourse of American identity and describes a specific group of people. For the second-generation Yalaltecos, class differences between themselves and White Americans play an essential role in the definition of both their ethnic identity and their social location as Mexican Americans. Two teenaged girls commented on their differences with white Americans in terms of class.

L: I do not consider myself entirely “America..” The Americans are the White Americans. We are not Americans in that sense. Above all, White Americans are rich. My sisters and I do not have those privileges. In the U.S. whether we like it or not, we are Mexicans [Female, 20 years old].

S: Yes, I agree. We cannot say that we are like White Americans. There are always differences between us. Once, I went shopping to a big mall in Irvine. When I was shopping, I felt that I was being watched over. When I paid, I was asked to show three IDs. I felt so discriminated [against]. I thought: why did they do that to me? They do not do that to White Americans. You know, I felt mistreated and discriminated [against]. Sometimes, Americans treat you as if you were not from here. Maybe, it is our way of dressing, the way we look, our shoes, our class, or our accent when we speak English. They may think that we are so poor so that we cannot go shopping in the same place they do. Certainly, we cannot do it and compare with them [Female, 27 years old].

## The Zapotec Identification:

### *Contrasting Responses of the Second Generation*

The main question that leads the discussion of the coming section is: Why do second-generation Yalaltecos hesitate to identify as Zapotec? This question is part of a broader concern with second-generation Yalaltecos who choose to identify as Mexican American, but do not necessarily claim an indigenous identity as Zapotec. I present an analysis of the ideas, behaviors, and values that make second-generation Yalaltecos assert this type of identity. Then, I discuss which elements make them think twice before claiming or denying a Zapotec identity. I posit two main arguments: First, those second-generation Yalaltecos, who assert Zapotec identity, do so because their parents tell them that they are Zapotec, they identify with some aspects of their parents' culture, and they are involved in the social life (Smith 2006) of the Yalálag Zapotec community in Los Angeles. Second, second-generation Yalaltecos, who deny ethnic identification as Zapotec do so because of racial discrimination, cultural clash with American society and the ethnic prejudices toward their indigenous identity.

Despite American mainstream myopia about ethnic differences within the Mexican community in the United States, second-generation Yalaltecos recognize that they are part of a distinctive group. When I asked them to describe the Zapotec culture and traditions, they were prompted to say things like:

Certainly, we have our own culture. Mexicans from Jalisco and Sinaloa, for example, have the Mariachi tradition and other types of brass band music. We [my emphasis] have our *jarabes* (a dance and music genre), the Zapotec brass band, "traditional" outfits, and our food. We also celebrate our baptisms, weddings, and funerals in the Zapotec way. And the Zapotec people are very supportive [Male, 15 years old].

In general, second-generation Yalálag Zapotecs characterize their ethnic identity as Oaxacan on the basis of these cultural practices. Those who claim an Oaxacan identity do so based on their continuing and voluntarily involvement with the Yalálag Zapotec immigrant community. To be Zapotec is a social process in which Zapotec immigrants recognize that second-generation Yalaltecos are part of their collectivity. For example, some teens participate in the Zapotec brass bands that liven up community gatherings, family fiestas, funerals, weddings, *quinceañeras*, and events organized by multi-ethnic Mexican indigenous organizations. According to second-generation Yalaltecos, they like attending community and family

events simply for the great feeling of affinity and commitment with their family and the “Oaxacan” community (See Figure 1).

**Figure 1**  
**Yalálag Zapotec youth brass band. Los Angeles, 2001**



Other second-generation Yalaltecos said that they participate in the performance of Zapotec religious and social dances during the *bailes* (community gatherings) to contribute to the success of these events (Cruz-Manjarrez 2009). Similarly, half of my interviewees reported that they enjoy participating in the annual Festival of *La Guelaguetza*<sup>4</sup> that takes place in Los Angeles because they like to represent the culture of Oaxaca (See Figure 2). One of my informants explained that her experience of performing in the festival of *La Guelaguetza* in the city of Oaxaca has made her feel closer to her roots. Recently, a few second-generation Yalaltecos have gone to the village of Yalálag to fulfill social obligations such as dancing and playing music for the patron saints of Yalálag.

So far, I have presented a few examples of what second-generation Yalaltecos count as aspects of their identity as Oaxaqueños. But, how do Zapotec immigrants define the indigenous ethnicity of their children? Well, commitment to participation in community cultural and social events allows second-generation Yalaltecos to be recognized as part of the Yalálag Zapotec

4. This is an annual festival of indigenous dance and music founded in 1989 and organized by the Zapotec immigrant communities in Los Angeles.

community. Despite the Americanization and Mexicanization of the second generation, involvement with the immigrant community legitimizes them as “genuine Zapotecs”. Mr. Sabino outlined this fulsomely:

Well, our children are Zapotecs. No doubts about it. Specially, those, who participate in the social life of our community, are Zapotec. Although they have been raised here, they have the Zapotec taste in what they eat, and many things they do. Many of them understand our language although they cannot speak it. Let’s say that they are 75 percent American because they like eating hamburgers and think as Americans. They learn this new type of life at school, in their exchanges with their friends, and what they do in their jobs.

Certainly, many teens do not care about their origin and culture, but what can we do? However, like many *paisanos* who feel proud of being Zapotec, I have taught my children our traditions, our values, our culture. If you ask my son to dance a *jarabe Yalalteco*, he will do it. You can see that he has the rhythm in his blood and his heart... do you remember the Zapotec youth brass band? I mean, just listen to those children. They know how to play. They have feeling. My other son, Chico, likes to play with the brass band. He does this because he likes it.

**Figure 2**  
**Second-generation Zapotecs performing in**  
**the Festival of La Guelaguetza. Los Angeles, 2003**



Let me tell you, recently, I videotaped Nelson in one *baile* (a community gathering). You know, he was born here. One day he will be the director of the brass band. Look at how he plays! It does not matter that he was born here, don't you think so? He has the Zapotec taste. He is an authentic Yalálag Zapotec. When one listens to those children in the brass band, one is reminded of our childhood, our homeland, and our relatives left behind. I can tell you that those little boys and girls know and identify with our culture. By the way, do you remember how Sheyla dances the *jarabe Yalalteco*? She gives feeling to the beat. I feel just so pleased every time I see her dancing. As I told you, they have it in their blood.

Most Yalálag Zapotec immigrants I spoke with highlighted that those children who participate and interact with Zapotec immigrants are considered “authentic” Zapotecs. When Zapotecs use the expression “authentic”, they are referring to two things. On the one hand, they are talking about the community involvement of second-generation Yalaltecos. On the other hand, being an “authentic Zapotec” depends on the ability of their children to act in the Zapotec way, conscientiously continuing the cultural and social traditions of the home community as an assertion of affiliation and identity (See Figure 3). As Bonfil Batalla suggests: “the [Mexican] Indian does not define him/herself in terms of a series of cultural traits –dress, language, customs, and so on– that makes him/her different in the eyes of outsiders. Rather, (s)he defines her/himself as belonging to an organized collectivity, a group, and a village that possesses a cultural heritage formed and transmitted through history by successive generations” (1996:21-22).

In the United States, second-generation Yalaltecos cannot deny that one aspect of their identity, is Zapotec. However, as I said at the beginning of this section, most of my respondents hesitated to identify as fully Zapotec.<sup>5</sup> When I inquired why second-generation Yalaltecos might think twice about identifying as Zapotecs, I found the following patterns. First, they think that they do not fulfill the models and expectations of the “authentic” Zapotecs. Second, they consider that they are not “pure” Zapotec because their lives are “more” influenced by aspects of Mexican and American cultures in the United States. Third, second-generation Yalaltecos refuse to think of themselves as Zapotecs because of ethnic and racial prejudices they have toward their indigenous roots. And fourthly, Yalálag Zapotec immigrants tell their children that they are Mexican American.

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5. In most cases, I interviewed second-generation Yalaltecos twice. For four years (2001-2004) I kept in contact with most of my interviewees. For this study, I interviewed 22 second-generation Yalaltecos.

**Figure 3**  
**Second-generation Yalálag Zapotec girl featuring the character of La Yalalteca of the dance of *Los Huenches*. Los Angeles, 2004**



Second-generation Yalaltecos described a 100 percent Zapotec as a person who was born in La Sierra and speaks Zapotec. They are also indigenous people who have suffered extreme poverty and racial and economic discrimination back in Mexico. In all interviews, second-generation Yalaltecos reported that they are proud of their mother culture and acknowledged their indigenous origin. Nonetheless, when they referred to the social constructed negative stereotypes of Zapotec identity, they tended to dis-identify as Zapotec. For instance, when they talked about Zapotec identity as a marker of Indianness, they refused to recognize that they themselves are indigenous.<sup>6</sup> As two second-generation Yalaltecos teens expressed it:

Juan: I think that many of us do not want to say that we are Yalálag Zapotecs. Many of us do not want to say it because some people look down upon us because we are Oaxacan Indians. I think that I am Zapotec.

6. It is important to mention that many of the Zapotec immigrants I interviewed assert their identity as Indians despite the negative stereotypes. They do so because they recognize that they are the native people of this continent.



Tere: Wait a minute. We are not Indians! Our parents are.

Juan: Look, that is why you do not want to say that we are from Oaxaca. Many of us do not want to feel discriminated [against]. In Los Angeles, Mexicans characterize Oaxacan immigrants as Indians. It is common to hear that we, the Indians, are those brown little people, who wear huaraches, *sombrero* (a hat made of palm leaves), and speak a dialect, and come from *los pueblos* (little villages located in the countryside). To tell the truth, I do not care about what other people think.

Tere: Well, I think he is rather talking about the expression “Oaxaquitas” (Little brown people from the state of Oaxaca). When people call us like that, I feel bad. I usually confront them and defend my culture and family roots. I feel very proud of being an Oaxaqueña, but I am not an Indian. I know what is he talking about... people say: “Oh yes, if they are from Oaxaca, they are Indians”. You know, one feels hurt by these comments.

The difference between these adolescents’ opinions is a crucial one to understand why 80 percent of my respondents refused to name themselves Zapotec. Tere’s refusal to identify overtly with her indigenous identity is based on these negative and racist views of “Indians” often expressed by people she encounters. In this context, Tere prefers moving away from her indigenous identification by emphasizing her identity as Oaxaqueña because it overlaps with her indigenous ethnicity.<sup>7</sup>

For Mexican Americans and Mexican *mestizos*, however, the second-generation Yalaltecos are Oaxaquitas because they look like the Oaxacan immigrant Indians. For second-generation Yalaltecos, the experience of ethnic and cultural racialization parallels the experience of racism faced by their parents and other Oaxacan indigenous migrants in California. Nagengast and Kearney (1990) describe how the experience of racialization has led to the emergence of a pan-indigenous and statewide identity as Oaxaqueño. As they say: this pan-ethnic identity builds on

...the shared Oaxacan migrant experience of ethno-racial discrimination in north-western Mexico and in California [which] drove the processes of ‘scaling up’ previously localized to broader Mixtec, Zapotec, and pan-ethnic Oaxacan indigenous identities (Nagengast and Kearney 1990, cited in Fox 2006:47).

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7. I use the labels “indigenous” or “Indian” in two ways. First, I use them to describe the identity of the Zapotecs as native people of the American continent. Second, I utilize Indian as a racial construct used by Mexican mestizos to characterize indigenous people in derogatory terms.



Thus, for second-generation Yalaltecos, the sense of identity as Oaxaqueño is socially constructed as an act of self-assertion and identification with their parents' indigenous culture.

Because Yalálag Zapotec immigrants describe themselves as *indios* in terms of their experiences of ethnic and racial discrimination, this has reinforced the idea that second-generation Yalaltecos are not “really” Zapotec. In three of my interviews, immigrants said in front of their children that hardship and suffering have characterized the lives of Zapotec people, but not of their children, thus de-legitimizing their children as Zapotecs. When immigrants spoke about their lives in Mexico, they described their marginal social and economic position, discrimination because of their Indian roots, and their children's ignorance about these issues: “Well, we have provided our children with a different type of life, and better opportunities and life conditions. They have access to education, health care, and a ‘better’ nutritional regime”, a Yalálag Zapotec man said. However, many Yalálag Zapotec immigrants tell their children that they are Oaxacan and Mexican American because of this discrimination. In addition, I observed that they tell their children that they are not “really” Zapotecs because Indians share certain forms of thinking and doing things, unlike second-generation Yalaltecos. For example, Mr. Sabino pointed out that although members of the second generation are culturally and racially “Zapotec Indians”, they do not understand “Indian” thought:

It is true. Our children do not know many things. They cannot. Our life has been hard, and at times very sad. They know about the culture of Oaxaca as represented by its food, language, music, and dances. They are familiar with our religious practices, what music needs to be played during the celebration of weddings and funerals, but they do not know about the *sistema indio* (Indian system). They do not understand the *gobierno indio* (traditional government), and the Indian people's thought. We, the Indians, want to be independent from the Mexican government and we want to live according to our laws and traditions.

For example, the *tequio* and the *gzwon* (Guelaguetza)<sup>8</sup> are two forms of collective work that are unique in our culture. Everyone is expected to work for our community and help each other. We have our own ways of thinking and living. That is what makes us different from them [referring to his sons]. We were born and raised within the Indian thought... the Indian system. These U.S.-born Yalálag Zapotecs do not know a lot of things about our culture and way of thinking. Of course, it is not their fault.

8. The *Guelaguetza* is a system of reciprocal support that permeates all aspects of social life in the Zapotec community.

So immigrants tell their children that they are not really Zapotecs, and this contributes to the weakening of a sense of Zapotecness among the second-generation Yalaltecos. Also, social pressures on second-generation Yalaltecos to assimilate to Mexican or American identity represent a process of becoming Mexican Americans. A relevant issue that second-generation Yalaltecos raised in our conversations was their uncertainty at calling themselves “pure” Zapotecs. When they mentioned that their blood remains purely Zapotec, they were positive of their indigenous roots. But, when they reflected on their cultural identity and compared it with that of non-immigrants, they did not see themselves as entirely Zapotec. Likewise, all Yalálag Zapotec immigrants I talked to undoubtedly see their children as racially and culturally Zapotecs; however, they do not know “how much” their children are Zapotec. In this context, it is common to hear immigrants and second-generation Yalaltecos employ a percentage system to determine their degree of Zapotecness.<sup>9</sup> Consider the following comments made by three second-generation Yalaltecos and their father:

O: My children are 50 percent Oaxaqueños and 50 percent American [male immigrant parent].

L: Well, I consider myself one-third Mexican, one-third American, and one-third Zapotec [Female, 20 years old].

S: I think that I am 50 percent American and 50 percent Mexican [Female, 27 years old].

J: I am 50 percent Mexican-American, 25 percent Oaxacan, and 25 percent Zapotec.

Some 1.5 generation adolescents talked about this issue in the same manner. They acknowledge that some members of the second generation qualify as 100 percent Zapotecs because of their cultural competence and closeness to the Yalálag Zapotec immigrant community. Alberto, one of the 1.5 generation, said this to me:

I consider Juan and Linda almost 100 percent Zapotec. Although they were born and raised in the United States and speak good English, they like to socialize with our *paisanos*. It is obvious that no one forces them to hang out with the Yalálag Zapotecs. If they are part of the Yalálag Zapotec community, it is because they like it and feel identified with our culture. These are the images and feelings I have about them. You know,

9. In the United States, it is common to hear Americans defining their ethnic roots on the basis of a blood percentage system. Second-generation Yalaltecos have learned to use this system but in a different way. They use diverse percentages to describe the identities that constitute their social selves.

they have our culture in their blood, and they also have chosen to be part of the Yalalteco community. Despite their American accent and nationality, I would say that they are more Zapotecs than *gabachos* (Americans).

As a result of conflicting images, stereotypes, and ideas of what is to be a real Zapotec, in addition to the constant remarks from Yalálag Zapotec immigrants about the partial and mixed nature of the cultural identity of second-generation Yalaltecos, an ambiguous sense of their indigenous ethnicity is continually reinforced.

This process of self-definition not only occurs at the center of contradicting ideas and images of what is to be a Yalálag Zapotec born in the United States, but happens in the middle of emergent and dominant discourses of identity. Yalálag Zapotec immigrants tell their children that they are Oaxacans. And indeed, to some extent, they are becoming Oaxaqueños in the United States. The following excerpt illustrates the opinions of two Yalálag Zapotec immigrants in which they renamed the identity of their children as Oaxaqueños:

O: My children are bicultural, that is, they are Americans and Oaxaqueños. At school, they learn the culture and history of the United States. At home, we teach them our customs. My wife has done a lot of things to teach them our culture. It was her idea to take them to the dance troupe called *Centéotl*. They love it. Now, they do not want to miss any class or festival. In fact, I have thought that they are more Oaxaqueños than us because they know much more about the culture and traditions of Oaxaca.

E: To me, they are Oaxaqueños and Americans. They are similar to us in many ways, but they are different too because of their way of thinking. They speak English and Spanish, are better educated, but physically they are Oaxaqueños.

Oaxaqueño is a term that denotes the *mestizo* population of Oaxaca in Mexico. An Oaxaqueño is above all a person who speaks Spanish. As mentioned above, in the United States, there is a growing sense of being Oaxaqueño among second-generation Yalaltecos. Being Oaxaqueño means speaking Spanish and identifying or claiming a sense of belonging to the Los Angeles-Oaxacan immigrant community. It also signifies being knowledgeable of diverse expressive and material cultural forms of the state of Oaxaca. As I mentioned earlier, second-generation Yalaltecos do not speak the language of their parents, and this has important implications in their sense of identification. Tomas was one of the second-generation Yalaltecos who had this experience:

I do not consider myself completely Zapotec because I do not speak the language of my parents. To some extent, I consider myself indigenous because of our food. Many of our traditions are pre-Hispanic. And we have our music and dances. However, I was not born in the village of Yalálag. When I went there, I realized that my way of thinking and goals are very different. When I socialize with my *paisanos* I can see our differences and similarities. Indeed, I consider myself indigenous because I was born from two indigenous people. But if someone else asks me about my identity, I would say that I am Oaxaqueño.

It is a fact that when some members of the second-generation Yalaltecos reach young adulthood in the United States, they are challenged to be involved in the social life of the Oaxacan immigrant community. At least three important reasons account for this: 1) the new demands of young adult life make them move away from their community; 2) peer pressure makes them feel ashamed of their indigenous roots; and 3) they want to enter social environments and new social relations that make it difficult to continue a high level of participation in their ethnic community.

## Concluding

### *remarks*

In Los Angeles, second-generation Yalaltecos are continuously negotiating and reframing their sense of identity as a generation and individually. This process is highly complex and contradictory, and furthermore still changing. My findings indicate that the construction of their multiple identities is not the result of a free combination of multiple selves. Indeed, second-generation Yalaltecos are empowered to choose how they want to identify, but from above, a series of hegemonic and homogenizing discourses on ethnic and racial identities in both Mexico and the United States shape and produce their perceptions of identity as American citizens of Mexican ancestry, Mexican American, and Oaxaqueño/a. From below, everyday practices, daily experiences, contact with other peoples, and opinions voiced by their parents, relatives, Yalálag Zapotec immigrants and non-immigrants, and peers all influence these perceptions as well. Although these youth recognize that one aspect of their identity is Zapotec, they do not feel a particular enthusiasm to name it. Most of them believe that they do not comply with the characteristics of what constitutes a “real” or “authentic” Yalálag Zapotec, but they like to participate in community life and that makes them identify as real Oaxaqueños regardless of the language they speak. While I maintain that second-generation Yalaltecos are developing a transnational and multiple identity; their sense of identity as Yalálag

Zapotecs is weakest among the others –American, Mexican American, and Oaxaqueño/a. They have internalized negative views and prejudices about their indigenous ethnicity that make them refuse or minimize their sense of identity as Yalaltecos.

One may conclude two things from these findings. First, being a Mexican American constitutes today a new type of incorporation into American society. At the same time, it represents a process of becoming Mexican Americans. Second, by being Mexican Americans, second-generation Yalaltecos have developed a sense of Oaxacanness that makes them different from the rest of the Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans in California.

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