

# Young Male and Female Indigenous University Cybernauts Between *Cara a Cara* and Face to Face<sup>1</sup>

Jorge Alberto Meneses Cárdenas\*



Noah Berger/Reuters

Young Latin Americans can be divided between those connected to the Internet and institutions and those who are not. However, we have to make visible those who, even in disadvantaged conditions, are situating themselves in bordering cultural spaces.<sup>2</sup> Metaphorically speaking, I would suggest this means transiting from *cara a cara* to face to face. To this end, I will situate myself in two university arenas: the University of the Sea in Huatulco, Mexico, and the University of Guajira, in Riohacha, Colombia, the former on the Mexican Pacific, and the latter in the Colombian Caribbean.

## INTERNET USERS IN COLOMBIA AND MEXICO

According to Colombia's National Administrative Statistics Department (DANE), 41.8 percent of the overall population

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said they were Internet users, but in rural areas, only 31.2 percent so.<sup>3</sup> Of these, 94.7 percent said they had cell phones, and 55.5 percent of that national total said they could log on to Internet using them. On the Atlantic Coast, where Riohacha is situated, 61.2 percent said they had a cellular phone.

In Mexico, according to the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI), 57.4 percent of the population uses the Internet, 71.5 percent uses cell phones, of whom 86.4 percent use them to connect to the Internet.<sup>4</sup> In this universe, 94.5 percent of higher education students use these services; however, the state of Oaxaca, where Huatulco is, comes in in the next to the next-to-the-last place among Mexican states for cellular phone users: 60 percent.

\* Professor-researcher at Mexico's University of the Sea; jorgemeneses@hotmail.com.

## FROM RANCH —AND OTHER PLACES— TO CITY

At the University of the Sea, young students hail from different regions like the coastal areas, the mountains, the plain, the Tehuantepec Isthmus, or the border between Guerrero or Chiapas states. This means that through these halls move young Zapotecs, Ikoots, Mixes, Mixtecs, Afro-Mexicans, and young people of other ethnic backgrounds.

The University of Guajira is attended by young Wayuus from the Highland, Middle, or Low Guajira region; from the border area with Venezuela, who come to “the indigenous capital of Colombia,” as the sign at the entrance to the town of Uribia says; plus Wiwas from the Santa Martha Mountains, or African-Colombians from Chocó, from Cali, from Cesar, or from Riohacha, who share the space day-to-day with their mestizo brethren.

One proof of the precariousness of their lives is the time it takes them to get from their communities to the cities where they train in the university. Some travel 15 hours or more to return home, more than it would take to get from Latin America to Europe by air. The reason is not the distance, but the travel conditions, in addition to the danger encountered on the highways and roads. It feels like something out of a discourse of cruel realism to say that, like hawks, robbers on the highways —seemingly never to be completed— are just waiting for the moment to charge the traveler for his/her right-of-way. But no: that danger is part of the ongoing insecurity in both coastal tropical areas and their regions in general.

In addition, they are among the first generations from their hometowns who are familiar with and have had access to cellular phones and computers in their early youth and even before. These devices are more familiar to them than to those who never finished primary school.

## HOUSING

The destinations of university migrants are single residences shared with other students they are unrelated to, or the homes of members of their extended families. Often they are precarious rooms where they use the same space for sleeping, working, eating, and doing homework as they surf the Internet looking at Facebook or chatting on WhatsApp, if they have wifi to connect their computer —if they have one— or cell phone to the web, which uses data to go on line if they have enough left to do it.

Male and female cybernauts of different social conditions share porous spaces with a density of meanings that may well be places for the crisscrossing and clash of cultural borders.

They may reside in places with surveillance (rooming houses) or without it. In the former, they may rent a room alone or share with other students; the rooms without surveillance are often rooms, apartments, or independent rented houses. The difference is that in the rooming houses, the landlord decides the surveillance and makes the rules and, despite paying for their rooms, the renters may well be subject to pressure, harassment, and even forms of symbolic violence. In the case of the women, they may be questioned about their virginity, subjected to controls of who can visit them (and whether they can ask their guests in), inspected, at least visually, and, if they have arrived late, checked to see the conditions they arrived in, which is the cause for murmurs at the very least.

## INDIGENOUS FORMS OF SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

The indigenous forms of social organization (termed “fosi” by Zapotec anthropologist Wilfrido Martínez Matías) are revived in the practice of young university students.<sup>5</sup> These include cooperation among different groups for the common academic good, reciprocal aid in different situations, the distribution of activities, or personal fiestas, all of which makes young people with different origins, genders, languages, and idiosyncrasies interact even though their knowledge and social practices are a heterogeneous mosaic that crosses cultural limits traditionally seen as homogeneous.

This all becomes clear when they do their housework. Without attempting to generalize, the women are more familiarized with the responsibilities implied in fending for yourself when away from your family. Knowing how to cook, wash, and clean the house, among other things, are skills that complement their university lives. It is not unusual to see men battling with elementary day-to-day activities, like getting fed and washing their clothes.

When the population in shared apartments is mixed, the women may act as organizers, and the dynamics can be

fraught with tension, conflict, and dissidence. The men may opt to leave or submit to the rules made by those who know more about the distribution of income and common activities inside a home. However, far from women being seen as destined to take charge of household matters, their skills inside the home make them be viewed as subjects with extra qualities that allow them to move ahead in their university careers more easily than the men.

#### MIGRATION AND GENDER

Migration observed from a gender perspective is showing that men first of all seem to be subjects who need to reconstruct themselves, breaking with practices from their homes and learning to fend for themselves. In many cases, they follow instructions from their female companions, who have no reason to be seen as falling in line with the sexist rhetoric that defines them as “the weaker sex.” Even though they come out of patriarchal power structures, as shown by the aforementioned circumstances, they are better prepared to deal with a life in which they will occupy different social positions, as roommates and university students, and that will require that they construct and reconstruct themselves in every border cultural micro-context they occupy, whether it be the home, school, or other public spaces.

What is certain is that their intervention in the university community organization, where activities are distributed through diverse social relations, revitalizes the forms of indigenous social organization, adapting them to the needs, unexpected occurrences, and day-to-day activities of young people.

#### CELL-ITUS?

While doing fieldwork in Colombia’s Guajira highlands, I went through many municipalities and hamlets with only a handful of houses. One time, a Wayuu over 50 told me that before, when a relative died, you used to have to go off on horseback, on a motorbike, or in a pick-up truck to tell the relatives who lived far away, whether in Colombia or Venezuela. He said that now, with cell phones, everything was simpler: you just had to call the phone number of the hamlet’s store or dial someone with a cell phone and get the information out there. One young Zapotec woman university student

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in the mountains of Oaxaca said that the way to get messages and news out is to dial the phone booth in a store in the town, which will have a megaphone to announce over a loudspeaker that the mother or relative in question should answer. In both cases, the way people connect reflects the structural precariousness both of phone and Internet services, as well as other basic services like electricity, water, and health care, among the most visible.

Despite this, cell phones and computers are socio-technological objects/devices that are being used/appropriated by young people. Some young people say that the cellphone appeared in their lives when they were between 11 and 15, while others say they did not have one “of their own” until they went to the university. Rosalía Winocur says that the cellphone is turning into an extension of the home.<sup>6</sup> In the university circumstances I observed, without disregarding this idea, I think that the cellphone is much more than just an extension of the nuclear family home or the classroom. More than putting them in constant communication with their relatives, among other things due to the lack of connectivity in their towns and their parents’ not being used to cellphones, particularly smartphones, they connect them to the digital world permanently, not only for their academic activities but also to make possible many socialization practices among equals. In many cases, if they do not have a personal computer, the cellphone is used for homework and also as a mobile device that connects them to parallel micro-worlds.

Male and female indigenous university students who do not have a device—either temporarily or permanently—are disconnected from day-to-day dynamics. If they have one, but are not connected to the Internet because of the lack of structural resources in the school or personal circumstances, the precariousness of the contemporary indigenous university student (male or female) comes to the fore: being connected to different social networks is how they constantly exchange information, share homework, and carry out group or individual activities through the networks they create according to their personal likes and dislikes, educa-

tional needs, and many practices of sociability, leisure, and communication.

## CONCLUSIONS

The performative is present in the face-to-face interactions and “enter-actions” (social, digital interactions). Cultural borrowings, symbolic exchanges, which materialize in social situations, are the result of a process in which the flows of meaning can link up ways of expressing agreements, solidarity, and different fusions, but also can create tensions, conflicts, and fission, in which precariousness comes to light and integration becomes relative, mediated by inequality and power.

The male and female cybernauts of different social conditions share porous spaces with a density of meanings that may well be places for the crisscrossing and clash of cultural borders expressed in different in-person and digital social network interactions.

Mixtec rap, Afro-Colombian hip hop, stories of Isthmus gay Zapotec stewardships, Wayuu *yonna* folk dance, local elections, Caribbean coastal *vallenato* music and festivals, student demonstrations, university events, and hometown churches, just to point to some cultural expressions, are shared on Facebook and other networks. The digital narratives are many; the photos, videos, memes, and texts are combined; they are all used in the present continuous, and cross with/in the biography of the male and female subjects in many narrative forms.

They may narrate-experience personal tensions, describe yearnings, announce their moods, share digital books, or post an invite to their birthday party. Many forms of interactions are made visible through their surfing the net, in the flow of situated knowledge that, far from being superficial, are testimony to the new forms of “being together,” new socio-cultural networks that make reference to a mosaic of knowledge that ranges from the personal to the local, the community-based, the national, and the global; from agreement and fusion to conflict and fission.

Lastly, I would like to point to the challenge embodied in the transit from *cara a cara* to face to face. Young male and female indigenous university students—and I would say, young people in general—in each situated specificity, are immersed in dynamics in which the space becomes dynamic through flows of meaning. Border micro-spaces can be

seen as arenas for socialization/sociability, from which they are transiting/surfing. The arenas of socialization can be seen as youth archipelagos where they are constructing situated experiences. The multi-situation-ness of the young forces us to understand their performative positions in a relational way, since it is clear that the ethnography of multiple spaces makes visible the social-digital connections, their face-to-face interactions, and the ways in which these new social relations are intimately reconfigured by the local spaces of meaning.

In the interest of seeing youth as a becoming, culture allows us to observe the flow of trajectories more than systematize their homogeneities. We can see how they are constructing their trajectories from border cultural scenarios, how precariousness and establishing agency offer the opportunity of making visible young people’s social situations as well as their multiple positions and identities. Perhaps we have arrived at the moment of seeing in young faces, actions, and meanings, chameleon-like beings who, depending on the social situation, inhabit their gender, ethnicity, their being at the university, as cybernauts. ■■■

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## NOTES

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<sup>2</sup> I use the notion of border areas found in Renato Rosaldo, *Cultura y verdad* (Mexico City: Grijalbo/Conaculta, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> DANE, “Encuesta Nacional de Calidad de Vida 2015,” Colombia, [http://www.dane.gov.co/files/investigaciones/condiciones\\_vida/calidad\\_vida/Presentacion\\_ECV\\_2015.pdf](http://www.dane.gov.co/files/investigaciones/condiciones_vida/calidad_vida/Presentacion_ECV_2015.pdf) accessed June 10, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> INEGI, “Estadísticas a propósito del día mundial del internet (17 de mayo),” Mexico, [http://www.inegi.org.mx/saladeprensa/aproposito/2016/internet/2016\\_0.pdf](http://www.inegi.org.mx/saladeprensa/aproposito/2016/internet/2016_0.pdf), accessed May 20, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Martínez Matías points out that community labor and collective decision-making are familiar to young Mexicans in the UNAM System of Scholarships for Indigenous Students. I adopt this term and agree that these forms of social organization can be observed among the young male and female university students in Huatulco and Riohacha, even though they each have their specificities. In Mexico, community labor is called *tequio*, and in Colombia, *minga*; both refer to reciprocity and involve punishment if not fulfilled, but are reconfigured based on young students’ experience.

<sup>6</sup> Rosalía Winocur, *Robinson ya tiene celular. La conexión como espacio de control de la incertidumbre* (Mexico City: UAM Iztapalapa/Siglo XXI, 2009), pp. 32-33.