

Identities

Sigrid Castañeda

*They gave me a handful of earth to live on.
 "Here, earthworm," they told me.
 "There you will cultivate, there you will raise your children,
 there you will chew your blessed corn".
 So I took that handful of earth,
 I fenced it with stones so that the water would not wash it away,
 I cupped it in the palm of my hand, I warmed it,
 I stroked it and began to till it...
 Every day I sang to that handful of earth;
 then came the ant, the cricket, the night bird,
 the grass snake,
 and they each wanted to use that handful of earth.
 I removed the fence and each one took their share.
 I was left alone again
 with the palm of my hand empty;
 I closed my hand, made it into a fist and decided to fight
 for what others had taken from us.*

FREDY CHIKANGANA (WIÑAY MALLKI)

To speak of a single and homogenous indigenous identity in Colombia is a mistake. Proposing a broad and plural reading acknowledges that indigenous identities are multiple, diverse, and fluctuating. They vary enormously from one community to another, including their histories, languages, worldviews, spiritual practices and forms of social organization. However, they share their deep rootedness in the relationship they maintain with their territory and with the nature that surrounds them. They also



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share a tragic history: the history of their annihilation and exclusion throughout the centuries.

In the case of Colombia, the construction of indigenous identities has been marked by fragmentation and displacement. It emerged from a dichotomy between a Christian and colonial world, identified as civilizing and marked by a feeling of superiority, and an "other" defined as savage and violent, from the historical perspectives of missionaries, colonizers, travelers, scientists, politicians, and landowners.

The history of indigenous peoples in Colombia is intertwined with a painful and shameful narrative of the country's history. For a long time, they were forced to give up their names, languages, gods, and lands. They have been used as a national emblem, glorifying the indigenous of the past, while dismissing their reality in the present. Although the history of their struggles for the defense of their rights has been hard-fought over time, the formation of the National Constituent Assembly, which explicitly recognized cultural and ethnic diversity in Colombia, marked a crucial turning point in the perception and valuation of indigenous identities, with the State recognizing their voice and existence for the first time.

Today, more than ever, indigenous identities are fluid, evolving, and adapting as communities interact with the contemporary world and face shifting challenges. Indigenous peoples do not limit themselves to being protagonists of the past, but claim their place and raise their voices as active agents in the present.

The image of the other

The construction of the image of the *Indian* - a term historically used to describe the indigenous peoples of the Americas - is a complex result of colonial processes and cultural domination that have endured throughout history. As a consequence,



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indigenous representations remained stuck in deeply rooted stereotypes based on value judgments regarding their appearance, identity, beliefs, and cultural practices. Although few images have been preserved of the indigenous peoples in Colombian territory during the colonial centuries, there are some examples in which they were sanctified by linking them to Christian morality. However, in many cases they were represented in a demonic way by associating their image with sin. They were portrayed as idolaters, savages, or damned, and for the most part, they were depicted in religious representations such as hell and purgatory.

At the height of civil portraiture in the 18th century, portraits of indigenous people proliferated, who, being able to afford the creation of a religious portrait, were represented as donors, following the Spanish style. These representations were not only intended to demonstrate their insertion into the new social structure, but also to propagate the Christian morality that had been imposed, accepted, and internalized, while at the same time highlighting the economic power that some of them had achieved in the colonial context.

In the 19th century, two types of representations of indigenous people emerged. Emblematic images were created to promote the independence identity, turning indigenous people into national symbols and exalting them in patriotic places and objects. These representations were based on myths that arose during the struggle for Independence and the formation of the nation. The other type involved descriptive representations, primarily developed by male European travelers. These travelers, who tended to see the indigenous people as a homogeneous and exotic group, indiscriminately used labels such as Indians, savages, natives, locals, populations, folk, and even peasants. They did not differentiate between their mannerisms, facial features and stance, equating and homogenizing groups that, in reality, were very diverse.



At the beginning of the 20th century, the arrival of social scientists and new schools of thought had a significant impact on the way indigenous cultures were represented. These contributions, based on ethnographic studies, sought to provide a more accurate representation of their lifestyles, beliefs, and practices. Although some of these contributions still maintained certain colonizing aspects, they played a crucial role in gradually challenging stereotypes and prejudices, countering Western narratives and underlining the importance of indigenous perspectives in the understanding of their own history.

Today, it is crucial to abandon the idea that someone else should represent indigenous peoples. Instead, the members of these communities play a central role in their self-representation and in the expression of their identity in today's society. Through the use of their individual, energetic, and contemporary voice, they share their unique experiences and perspectives, which, in turn, propose a necessary reconfiguration of how indigenous people are perceived in today's society.

Images of resistance

Indigenous communities face multiple forms of oppression related to their identities. They do not experience just one type of discrimination, but face a combination of factors that work simultaneously. Thus, their experience of oppression and discrimination is not only attributed to their indigenous identity, but is also shaped by gender, sexual orientation, and economic status, among many other factors.

Thus, being an indigenous woman has often entailed facing specific forms of discrimination and violence, resulting from both their gender and their belonging to a community. Historically, they have been the object of plunder by colonizers, the subject of study for scientists, the muse for artists and, in many communities, relegated to the role of reproductive womb for their lineage. However, since the *Manifiesto de*



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las catorce mil mujeres lamistas (Manifesto of the Fourteen Thousand Lamista Women), an event that took place in May 1927 and gave a voice to indigenous women from the regions of Tolima, Cauca, and Huila in their struggle for territorial rights, indigenous women have occupied new spaces and have defended their own voice. This movement was subsequently framed within the discourse of women's empowerment that followed the May 1968 movement. Today, although the struggle continues, others no longer speak on behalf of indigenous women. Their voice is increasingly heard in the defense of their rights as active subjects, marking a significant change in their empowerment and in their struggle for gender equality, as well as in the preservation of their cultural identities.

From indigenous communities, the voices of indigenous women and LGBTQI+ people who have been severely persecuted are raised to address the preservation of their culture and traditions, in addition to promoting their participation in the community and resisting colonization and male control. These voices are diverse and multifaceted, with the purpose of strengthening the plurality of indigenous people and promoting gender equity both within their communities and in society in general.



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