

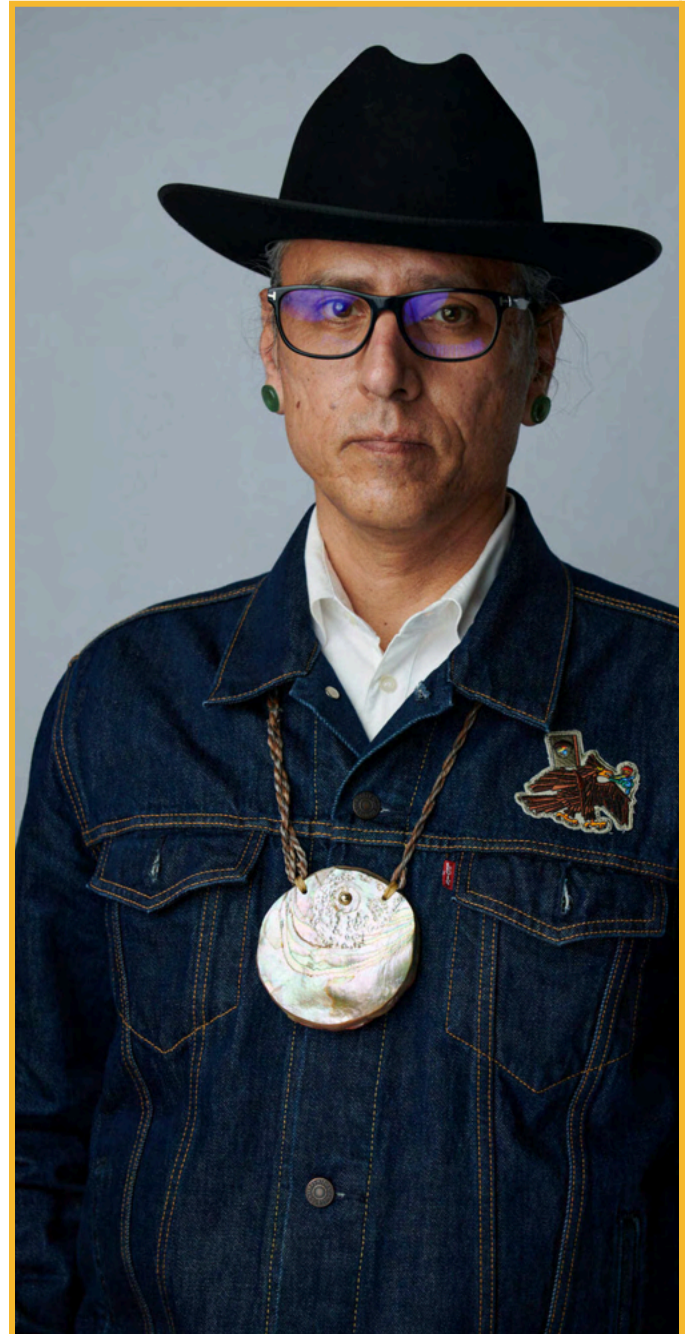
Reimagining our Future through Indigenous Education



By Marcos Aguilar
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I am Masewalli Mexicano from Mexico. My family origins come through the desert of Mexicali where I was born, as a result of forced migrations and slavery. My mother was a teen mom and eventually succumbed to drug addiction and mental health issues. My father also struggled with an untreated mental health crisis and eventually died in my care from heart failure after refusing to accept a pacemaker which could have saved his life. I was raised by my great-aunt who was orphaned at a young age and never had children of her own, instead adopting and raising three generations of boys all by herself. Our grandparents were orphans, migrants, and laborers, reflecting the international realities that we know about Indigenous youth and Indigenous Peoples across the hemisphere.

We have moved to the coasts, and we have moved to the big cities. While our homelands and territories are still occupied by our peoples, the vast



majority of Indigenous Peoples now survive in those two contexts across the hemisphere. Here, in Los Angeles, we find ourselves in the state with the largest population of Indigenous Peoples outside of Mexico City and the second largest in terms of the cities in the United States, outside of New York. It's a very international reality both in terms of the international/national origins of people from different countries as well as the international context of Indigenous Peoples from different Native nations. Many of these people are here through forced migration as a result of U.S. international policy and others were displaced due to realities imposed by Western colonization for over five hundred years.



Our school, originally founded in 2002 as Academia Semillas del Pueblo, is now called Anahuacalmecac International University Preparatory of North America (“Anawakalmekak” in the modern Nahuatl spelling) and is located near an ancestral Gabrielino-Shoshone village site called Otsuugna - the Land of the Roses. It's in a neighborhood now called El Sereno and Rose Hills, which might have come from the original village name. I'm speaking to you from a territory that was unceded by the Indigenous Peoples to the Spanish

crown, the Mexican state, or the United States of America; it is now referred to as the territories of Tovaangar in the native language. I helped establish the school to create an Indigenous educational model as an alternative to the destructive forces of American schooling, such as assimilation, deculturalization, and linguicide.

Indigenous Education not American Schooling

My experience in schooling was always confrontational. Teachers, who are the physical embodiment of authority, forced me to memorize “America the Beautiful” in order to Americanize me. At that time, we would get hit by principals with spankings or paddles. That was a little bit all too common for me. I also had to contend with the segregation that took place in our school with determining who's gifted and who isn't gifted. I was tracked into the gifted track. I wanted that recognition as a kid because of the destructiveness in my own home environment.

I represent one of the education system's biggest accomplishments and its biggest failure. I'm highly educated and schooled beyond the 12th grade, and yet I reject it. I'm actively looking for ways to help other families reject it as well and to do so in a way that is not a rejection of education, but a rejection of schooling.

American schooling for Indigenous Peoples began with boarding schools, designed to destroy our cultures. Just recently we saw another major federal lawsuit filed against the Bureau of Indian Education's Indian schools, like the one in Havasupai, which is an amazing example of cultural and educational genocide. The colonizing history of boarding schools continues today, especially in a city like Los Angeles where we are, as Indigenous Peoples, contending with a city that until very recently, criminalized the original peoples, relegated American Indians to the past, and ignored the existence of Indigenous People in this territory, and one that still celebrates the mission system as a sacred relic of the Christian colonization of these territories.

The State of California and the Los Angeles Unified School District do not adequately address the needs of American Indian students in the public school system. Not only do they not address them, but they violate their rights and their persons. One of the ways that we've found to most clearly describe this is around the right to tribal consultation. In an international context, we would say the right to free, prior, and informed consent, which is a sovereign right of Indigenous Peoples recognized in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, as it relates to the lives of our children and the education that they receive. The district has been violating that right. That's an important violation because it's distinct from the civil rights type of legal theory and acknowledgement of racism and systemic racism that recognizes individuals' rights, but not necessarily collective rights.

I typically don't refer to public education in the romantic version of what public schools were in the "wonder years," but rather as a continual project of colonization and of settlement that the government imposes. Attending school is compulsory for Native youth, the educators come predominantly from the dominant white majority, and the content of the curriculum does not reflect Native history and culture. I should also emphasize the obvious fact that public schools operate on Indigenous lands that have been stolen from Indigenous peoples.

My wife and I came to education and community organizing through a five-year struggle at UCLA to establish a department of Chicana and Chicano studies that culminated in a hunger strike in 1993. I was one of the hunger strikers as well as one of the student leaders of the occupation of the faculty center where a hundred students were arrested. Several were beaten and some - particularly our African American and Muslim brothers that had joined us - were tortured in the county jail by the sheriffs. The leadership came from a multicultural group called Conscious Students of Color. We organized through our dance circle as Indigenous youth, and other youth organizations occupied the facility too because, as

the chancellor put it, Chicano studies would continue over his "dead body."

We both won and lost in the hunger strike, and it taught us some important lessons about organizing. We won the hunger strike in the sense that we signed an agreement that made the university commit to hiring 15 faculty and establish a center. They refused to call it a department, but after two weeks of a water-only fast, we had pretty much been convinced that that was a good enough victory and that we shouldn't risk one of us dying. This was a time of massive civil unrest in Los Angeles. We had survived the rebellions and uprisings in South-Central and throughout LA. We had survived janitor strikes, and organized labor had become influenced by waves of Central American and Mexican workers who brought with them the strategies and tactics of labor organizing from Mexico and Latin America. All of that forged, in many ways, the work that we're doing now in intersectional organizing and in our own base building and community building for self-determination in our community.

Intersectional Organizing Centered in our School

We formed the school as Indigenous traditional Aztec dancers. For almost a decade we organized cultural dance circles outside of the schools, looking to make connections with families and work with kids in ways that were independent of schooling.

Our focus and the majority of our most inspiring work is done in how we raise children, now over 20 years since we opened, having raised eight classes of students from kindergarten to 12th grade. There's also a need for us to address the environment that they live in. So we advocate to change the ecosystem for children, both our students as well as children around us in Los Angeles County and beyond, contributing to the struggles for health, housing, and habitat restoration.

Our school is part of the grounding of our work as educators in wanting to defend the right of our children and of our families to be able to practice our culture, learn our language, and educate ourselves, our children, and our next generation in the context of an independent school model. We have unique practices that we feel are designed towards liberatory and transformative pedagogy in education. We have very obvious ways in which we do that through language education, social-cultural education, and emotional intelligence education.

Education and organizing is connected in our work. We work with families across the board concerning their lived realities. We address these lived realities in the school and through family organizing, parent organizing, and youth organizing. We ground our education and organizing in our relationship with the Earth and our relationship with ourselves, our past, and our vision for our future.



The Challenges of Creating Authentic Solidarity

In the context of the United States, solidarity is always a question from the inside out. It's often about individual citizens or groups wanting to contend with their angst at being partially responsible for oppression and exploitation elsewhere, and yet not sacrifice their privilege. I would say it's very difficult to separate solidarity from paternalism. It's very difficult to separate solidarity from settlerism. I mean, solidarity has taken on a bad connotation for me. I was on a

national call recently with a Black leader who was one of the last surviving lieutenants who worked with Reverend Martin Luther King. Somebody asked him about Palestine and whether or not we should be doing more to support Palestine. His position shocked me, although I understand it. He's like, "Look, we can't help anybody else. There is no example where the United States has gone to help anybody else, and it's been good." He was also meaning that about the solidarity movements.

The only way I can think about solidarity is in an international context because I see the United States as a foreign state, a state that's occupied other nations. I don't see myself as part of the United States. Although I'm a citizen of the United States through naturalization, it's not my project to defend. I'm certainly willing to entertain the idea that we could create a more perfect union, but I don't see us going in that direction. The question is, so what is it that this more perfect union is ultimately imposing on other movements or on other communities? There's a question of balance in solidarity with regards to what you give and what you get out of it. I think solidarity as typically practiced is more about getting something out than it is about giving.

The cliché that our liberation is intertwined is true. There are new examples and new opportunities for us to redefine how we support each other's liberation. I look for the nature of the exchange. Is it one that's grounded in each other's liberation? Is it one that's grounded in each other's self-determination? Or is it transactional, not necessarily in economic terms, but in cultural and emotional terms? Does it allow us to escape the context in this country, the context of Americanization?

Let me give an example. Our school is basically an old storefront, so the parking lots are our playground. Our vision has always been to have trees around us and hills and open land. A nearby Christian school closed down a few years ago, and they had a nine-acre campus that they actually occupied at the turn of the century. They were the

first American settlers in this whole territory, and they had held on to this huge piece of property for all these years before they put it on the market. I went to meet with the seller, who was a pastor in the church. He said, "Well, if you will join me one day and pray to Jesus Christ and accept him as your savior, then we can work on a deal."

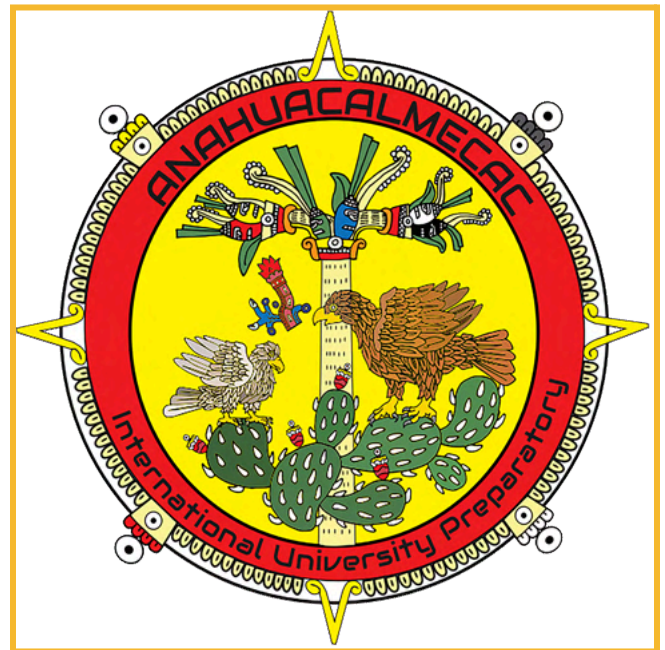
Many times, solidarity is about that. We have to accept the relationship as bound by the current confines, as opposed to re-imagining what our collaboration can be, what young people now call co-conspiracy. We need to move from, "I'll help you from my safe corner," to, "Let's both put ourselves at risk to truly change the world." We need to find ways to do that without making us become each other, but certainly being able to love each other and grow from each other, as a humanizing process.

The Zapatista movement represents a more authentic example different from solidarity as it's often practiced. Many people wanted to help save the Mayans in the Lacandon jungle, the Mayans in the highlands of Mexico. They said, "No thank you. We're fine. If you can just stop the soldiers from killing us, we'll do everything else." That allowed people to redirect their energy and resources in ways that uplifted themselves, as much as find ways to support the Zapatista movement.

Our work in Indigenous education is an example of working towards authentic solidarity. I would have liked it to accomplish a lot more, a lot quicker, but we are having to personalize the work and get to know each other as organizers in Los Angeles, even though we've been around each other for decades. We're having to contend with the difficulties of what it means to be American Indian versus what it means to be Indigenous. What do Indigenous people's rights from other parts of the hemisphere mean to Indigenous people in the United States who have treaty-based rights. This pushes us forward, pushing us all to uplift each of our communities' and nations' self-determination, while we find the common ground in our organizing

to contend with the district and to contend with the United States government.

While working toward solidarity, we should not deprioritize base-building work and community-building work. That's something that emerged from the Zapatista movement, whether it's communities of practice, communities of struggle, or actual lived communities where people's homes are bound together in some way. The connection between the organizing and our lived daily realities has to be aligned.



Spreading Models of Indigenous Education

In our school we have to contend with the concerns that parents and government agencies have with regards to quality education. But we try to redefine that on our terms and then defend it. That's the reality of having a school and not simply having a campaign or operating outside of school where you have no tail to step on. We have to contend with the defense of our school, literally in terms of the defense against threats of bombing and death threats that we've received. There has been a perpetual war against our school, a war of a thousand cuts that took place over a decade to get us shut down. Now we have to defend ourselves from even our friends or likely allies that would

question our school as either a step towards privatization or as insignificant in impact because it's a one-off.

Our school's context is international. We have a relationship and affiliation with our pueblos in Mexico, whether it be in Oaxaca, Guerrero, or Central Mexico. In other words, our impact and reach are also inspiring change and educational transformation in our pueblos beyond Los Angeles.

What we call Indigenous education here is intended to be transformative. We're uplifting a unique legacy in that our people organized distinct institutions of learning prior to colonization. That none of them survived is a testament to the violence of genocide, not to our lack of or interest in education.

The work that we're doing is centered in education, but we witnessed how education intersects with all aspects of our families' and our community's lives. We set out to find a way to create community controlled educational models that affirm our self-determination as Indigenous Peoples away from our homelands. Through Indigenous education and organizing we're engaged in re-imagining our future. ❖

Marcos Aguilar is the co-founder of the Anahuacalmecac International University Preparatory of North America ("Anawakalmekak") and currently serves as Executive Director of Semillas Sociedad Civil, the school's sponsoring nonprofit organization. Since 2001, he has served as a community organizer, pedagogical lead, and a charter school developer for a community-based organization of parents and educators, where he has been responsible for curriculum design, strategic planning, community mobilization, budget management, and governmental relations.

Anawakalmekak is Los Angeles County's only autonomous Indigenous Peoples K-12 public community-based school. Anawakalmekak is dedicated to student academic excellence, Native wisdom, appreciation of the cultural and intellectual heritage of Indigenous Peoples, and the promotion of positive social awareness.