Theories and Methodologies

Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Public Humanities: *Ayni* as Community Engagement

AMÉRICO MENDOZA-MORI

Allillanchu! This is one of the ways people greet each other in Quechua, an Indigenous language family in South America. Many people in the United States would recognize greetings in Spanish, German, or Chinese—*hola*, *hallo*, or 你好 ("nǐ hǎo")—even if they don't speak these languages. They would also probably know that these languages have robust communities of speakers, are relevant in today's society, and are used to produce knowledge and innovation. Conversely, perceptions of Quechua and other Indigenous languages might be different: they are largely overlooked and wrongly associated with backwardness. This attitude not only marginalizes different voices and communities but also inhibits opportunities for innovation and for contesting legacies of discrimination. Public humanities work practiced in the most inclusive ways acknowledges both that there are publics for whom English is not the primary language and that their languages, especially those that are less studied, are necessary to public discourse. This recognition is especially urgent for Indigenous languages.

Indigenous populations across the world carry cultural practices and wisdom, yet they are not frequently recognized as holders of knowledge and expertise. Indigenous scholars and activists have coined the term *Indigenous knowledge systems* to educate people within and beyond their communities about the value and relevance of different wisdom traditions. Academia must not simply acknowledge the existence of Indigenous knowledge systems but make space for learning in a different way, from different cosmovisions. This essay explores how integrating Indigenous languages and cultures into higher education can advance the humanities, empower diverse students and scholars, and develop meaningful educational and community partnerships.

AMÉRICO MENDOZA-MORI is an interdisciplinary scholar trained in literary, linguistic, and cultural studies and affiliated with Harvard University's Committee on Ethnicity, Migration, Rights. His research and teaching focus on Latin America, US *latinidad*, and global Indigeneity. He has actively collaborated with academic and community-based organizations in the Andes and the United States.

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PMLA 140.1 (2025), doi:10.1632/S0030812925000082

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812925000082 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Indigenous knowledge systems encompass practices, wisdom, and ontologies developed within Indigenous societies globally. These systems demand fundamentally different approaches to public humanities that are intertwined with community life, social justice, and environmental sustainability. They are essential to public humanities, not merely as an outreach tool but as transformative frameworks that can redefine academic and public discourse. Indigenous traditions of knowledge can foster unique learning experiences for those within academia and for communities beyond it for social and environmental justice, decolonization, human rights, and innovation. There are many contemporary areas of research—such as food security, climate change, healthcare, entrepreneurship, human rights and reparations, and the philosophy of well-being—where Indigenous knowledge systems are poised to intervene.

Understanding Indigenous knowledge as both ontology and practice avoids replicating colonial dynamics in public humanities work. To start, academics must recognize the value of Indigenous knowledge systems as sites of scholarly knowledge. With regard to food security, for example, incorporating Indigenous knowledge systems means promoting Indigenous stewardship of land and foodways, including superfoods such as avocados (*ahuacatl*, in Nahuatl), maca, or quinoa; in philosophy, it means learning from such practices as meditation and working with knowledge keepers. In healthcare, academics can draw from Indigenous knowledge pertaining to forms of care, public health policy, and the use of plants and other traditional medicines; climate researchers should harness Indigenous technologies and knowledges to respond to climate change (see Kimmerer; Allen; Tabobondung et al.). The study of economics should include the different economic and trade models of Indigenous societies, such as Maori entrepreneurship or Aymara informal economic dynamics (see Teorongonui and Woods; Catacora-Vidangos; Loyer and Knight). Indigenous knowledge of human rights, reparations, and memory studies has a vital place in these fields (see Liboiron; Estes). Academic disciplines can play a pivotal role in enhancing the visibility of Indigeneity within curricula and research, inviting further exploration of the relationship between Indigenous knowledge systems and public humanities.

These connections raise an important ethical question: How can universities responsibly and respectfully engage with Indigenous knowledges to enrich public understanding and discourse? To describe this engagement, I use the Quechua term *ayni*, which denotes reciprocity and collaboration. *Ayni* is both an ontology and a widespread practice in the Andes. When people need to get something done, members from the community contribute, whether it's building a new house together, helping with the harvest, or being part of the organizing committee of a local festivity. Embracing perspectives like *ayni* incorporates components of Indigeneity into public humanities practices, in both theory and method, by putting emphasis on collaboration and a sense of community.

I look back at my time in elementary school in Peru and reflect on how most of what I was taught about Quechua was connected primarily to the Incas and their historical marvels like Machu Picchu. Although Quechua is currently the most spoken Indigenous language family in the Americas, with nearly ten million speakers across the Andes, it is often portrayed as a relic of the past. National narratives in Latin America typically frame Quechua and other Indigenous languages as historical artifacts rather than living languages. Considering Quechua in terms of numbers of speakers alongside languages like Swedish (nine million speakers), Danish (six million), or Catalan (eight million) highlights its contemporary relevance. Indigenous languages like Quechua have substantial diaspora communities, including an estimated ten thousand speakers in the New York City area alone (Mendoza-Mori and Sprouse 138). These statistics make clear that Quechua speakers constitute a public, both in Peru and in places like the United States with a significant Quechua-speaking diaspora. But efforts are still needed to raise awareness about Quechua and other Indigenous languages, cultures, and populations, and higher education should be an important partner in this

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812925000082 Published online by Cambridge University Press

process. Creating spaces in colleges and universities to promote language learning, therefore, is a key component in public humanities that expand the visibility and recognition of Indigenous cultures, languages, and knowledges.

Languages contain far more than words. As the concept of *ayni* demonstrates, languages embody the values, knowledges, and innovations of their speakers. Overlooking Indigenous languages and cultures equates to erasing their communities and contributions. The Quechua scholar Sandy Grande argues that limiting the spread of Indigenous culture and language perpetuates stereotypes and intellectual extractivism and restricts marginalized communities' agency and human rights. Combating these dynamics involves embracing Indigenous knowledge systems, which help us learn in fundamentally different ways and acknowledge Indigenous communities' relevance to contemporary society. Young generations of musicians, scholars, artists, and diplomats are fighting to create more spaces to be visible. As the Tewa scholar Gregory Cajete notes, "[T]he Native or cultural science of each tribe or cultural region is unique and characteristic of that group or geological area in that it reflects adaptation to a certain place" (126). The goal of the public humanities to engage audiences beyond academia poses an opportunity to interpret, present, and preserve these different agents and knowledge producers, recognizing the importance of language to placemaking and social innovation in the present.

When Europeans invaded the Americas in the late fifteenth century, they began efforts at acculturation and language assimilation, generating a hierarchy not only of cultures but also of peoples. Anibal Quijano explains that the colonization of territory in the Americas was also a colonization of power and knowledge, where the Eurocentric authority decided what was valuable and what was not (344). Later, in the nineteenth century, the creation of newly independent republics in the Americas did not improve the situation of many Indigenous populations, languages, and knowledges or provide political representation for Indigenous peoples. While some constitutions now recognize Indigenous languages as official—Quechua languages, for instance, were officially recognized in Peru in 1975, in Bolivia in 1977, and in Ecuador (as Kichwa) in 2008—legislation expressly protecting and recognizing Indigenous territories began to appear only in the twentieth century. Acknowledging this colonial context is vital for ensuring that Indigenous voices and knowledge are visible today.

As an educator who works with Indigenous language revitalization, I find it useful to help students and community members think about common words used in English that come from Indigenous languages: *quinoa* and *llama* (from Quechua), *guacamole* and *tomato* (from Nahuatl), and *hurricane* and *barbeque* (from Taíno). Students are already connected with many of these languages, but they are probably not very aware of them. This initial realization that Indigenous languages are closer to them than they might imagine can be a step toward acknowledging the communities of speakers who accompany those languages and their worldviews. One example is the Quechua term *Pachamama*, often translated as "Mother Earth." In Andean thought, *Pachamama* represents a filial connection to the planet, rather than one in which it is treated as merely a resource provider. The term *Pachamama* can introduce ideas and proposals associated with Indigenous ontologies to both academic and community conversations about the pressing issues of climate change and environmental degradation.

Recognizing the Indigenous ontologies embodied in terms like *Pachamama* means recognizing living Indigenous knowledges and expertise, challenging timeless depictions of ancient ruins or lost peoples. For example, incorporating practices like the use of *andenes*—stair-like terraces for flood prevention and food cultivation—could be a path toward university-community partnerships promoting food justice. There are already scholars working on these questions, including Mariaelena Huambachano, who works on food sovereignty within Maori and Quechua Indigenous communities. Efforts like these start from linguistic interventions that center Indigeneity and the concept-practice *ayni*, in turn creating catalysts for intervening in society's most important issues.

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Thinkers and creators who work outside higher education have already recognized the importance of Indigenous knowledge systems to social change. Despite ongoing discrimination, many people identify as Indigenous and explore ways to celebrate and reclaim their identities. Many communities have maintained their celebrations, organizations, and traditional practices despite migrations from rural to urban areas. Youth are particularly engaged in preserving their cultures and languages. The Peruvian linguist Virginia Zavala points out that in the case of Quechua, many of these young language and cultural activists are "trying to use Quechua and debate about the language in urban spaces with a conscious and overt stance towards social change and the contestation of official language ideologies" (65). The young Quechua singer Renata Flores has publicly commented on the perception of Quechua as a language of poverty (see, e.g., Sánchez), while the Quechua hip-hop artist Liberato Kani recognizes Quechua as a language of resistance (Zavala 73). In the United States, Latinx populations navigate a racialized society, and within these communities, there is a growing conversation about combating white supremacy by acknowledging Afro-diasporic and Indigenous heritages. Young Latines in the United States are starting to see their Indigenous heritage as a more integral part of their multicultural identities and as part of their educational journey (see Urrieta; Martínez and Train).

These efforts raise the question of what colleges and universities can do to support community-based social justice efforts rooted in Indigenous languages and cultures through public humanities. Higher education can promote cultural awareness despite colonial legacies, offering opportunities to change narratives around education, anti-Blackness and anti-Indigeneity. Such initiatives are more than just outreach; they enrich academic conversations and provide an opportunity to expand the scope of academia by collaborating with and empowering Indigenous communities. Creating the right infrastructure is crucial for this transformation.

I founded and coordinated the Quechua language and Andean culture program at the University of Pennsylvania, and I currently work as a faculty member in Latinx Studies at Harvard University, where I founded the Quechua Initiative on Global Indigeneity and have served as the faculty director of the Latinx Studies Working Group. If we are committed to integrating Indigenous knowledge systems into public humanities, we must begin by ensuring that Latin American, Latino/e, and Hispanic studies and language courses, from the elementary level, highlight Indigenous cultures. These programs have, for too long, ignored Indigenous peoples and the African diaspora, which perpetuates anti-Indigeneity and anti-Blackness (see Fountain). This might mean selecting textbooks that are more conscious about inclusion and finding high-quality Internet materials, including videos and music, to fill this gap.

Teaching Indigenous languages themselves matters too, though convincing universities to invest in them is a challenge (see Mendoza-Mori). Collaboration among institutions that create curricular consortia is a potential solution. For example, a partnership of Duke University, the University of Virginia, and Vanderbilt University allows these institutions to offer Maya Kich'e, while Ohio State University, Indiana University, Oberlin College, Purdue University, and Northwestern University offer Quechua through their collaboration. These language and culture programs can become platforms for the active presence of Indigenous scholars, activists, and artists—people who do the work of the humanities in the world.

Efforts beyond the classroom are also necessary for realizing the value of Indigenous knowledge systems in public humanities. Indigeneity should be welcomed in different academic spaces and communities on campus (see, e.g., Muñoz-Díaz et al.), and these spaces and events must equally invite communities in. Fostering partnerships with students and centers to host activities, promote the study of works, or invite speakers can be an important step toward the visibility of Indigenous topics and, most importantly, Indigenous voices. While working at the University of Pennsylvania, I wanted to invite an award-winning Quechua writer to campus and learned about the university's Kelly

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812925000082 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Writers House, a university-community space. Although their programming is typically focused on English-language writers, we reached out and asked if they had ever hosted an Indigenous-language writer. Their response was, "We haven't yet, but let's do it." Allyship is critical for expanding such opportunities.

Community engagement is, then, a crucial practice within and beyond the university. Campuses are becoming more diverse, and the study of Indigeneity should no longer be framed as the study of otherness. Students who identify as Indigenous or have Indigenous heritage can plan events on campus such as powwows (Native American celebrations) or Day of the Dead commemorations, participate in student roundtables on Indigeneity, organize student groups, or write theses on topics related to Indigeneity, if they receive the appropriate support and guidance. But for all of that to happen, we need university programs and offices to be more intentionally flexible and welcoming of community participation. Would a university library be open to the possibility of having a Day of the Dead altar? Would the public health program be open to inviting an Indigenous midwife as a speaker on child mortality? Or would the university admissions office include some space connected to Indigeneity in tours or on the map?

Guest speakers at colleges and universities are commonly expected to have advanced degrees, but the accomplishments of Indigenous community members can be reflected in other ways. It is important to recognize that Indigenous knowledge systems not only produce knowledge but also generate different mechanisms for learning and innovation. The Indigenous scholar Wesley Y. Leonard understands the praxis of knowledge systems in this sense as "cultural reclamation," which he defines as "a larger effort by a community to claim its right to speak a language and to set associated goals in response to community needs and perspectives" (19). And for this reclamation to happen, community members who don't hold advanced degrees must also be recognized as possessing expertise. Public humanities infrastructures enable scholars to become better partners with communities and to bring voices from these communities into the university.

The Quechua program of the Penn Language Center allows affiliated faculty members and students to engage publicly at the local, national, and international levels. We began by inviting a variety of Indigenous scholars to campus and hosting community events at the university museum with decolonized perspectives (putting emphasis on contemporary Indigenous ingenuity, instead of only the ancient artifacts). The relationships and partnerships that started with those activities then allowed us to host similar activities in neighborhoods with Indigenous communities. At the local level, we partnered with restaurants and cultural centers, like South Philly Barbacoa, and with local public scholars to organize free cultural events. As a result, the grassroots organization Indigenous People's Day Philly invited us to participate in their annual community celebration, where we facilitated activities to raise awareness of the vitality of Indigenous languages. Our Indigenous language program also operated as an incubator for other initiatives, such as the Quechua Alliance. Since 2015, this initiative has organized an annual community gathering with Indigenous speakers of Quechua, students, educators, and community members (Marádi). The event has been hosted at different universities that also offer Quechua or Andean studies courses, including New York University, Ohio State, Harvard, and Northwestern.

With the collaboration of students, faculty members, and local community members in the Boston area, I was also able to build meaningful platforms for the advancement of public humanities at Harvard. We started the Quechua Initiative on Global Indigeneity, organized events on campus, and attended the annual session of the United Nations Forum on Indigenous Issues in New York City. These annual sessions bring people together from different parts of the world: Indigenous communities, public intellectuals, UN diplomats, government officials, and nonprofit organizations. And at the local level, I engaged with middle schools with significant Indigenous

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812925000082 Published online by Cambridge University Press

migrant populations in the Boston area. These initiatives facilitate collaborations—or *ayni*—and expand the scope of academia through public humanities. For me, these initiatives have been a starting point for developing a public humanities practice focused on strengthening relationships with Indigenous communities. This work includes writing op-eds or providing quotes for newspapers, participating in podcasts, visiting public schools and elder care homes, giving talks in community settings, giving expert testimony in asylum cases involving Indigenous migrants in the United States, attending community parades and festivities, organizing community events, offering mentorship to prospective Indigenous students, and supporting community grant applications, among other activities.

Recognizing the importance of inclusivity, meaningful diversity, and decoloniality prompts us to look for a more holistic and relational approach to what we call knowledge production in academia. That entails recognizing Indigenous issues and recruiting students, scholars, and community members who have expertise on those matters. Reflecting on the work I have been involved in, I have seen how the Quechua Language Program at the University of Pennsylvania and the Quechua Initiative on Global Indigeneity at Harvard operate as platforms for incorporating Indigenous knowledges and voices into the curricula and college life, which, in turn, prompts the development of partnerships with Indigenous communities—the very essence of *ayni*.

Finally, initiatives in the Global North to support Indigenous languages and cultures affirm these communities' resilience and resistance. For non-Indigenous individuals, these efforts provide a holistic understanding of knowledge, emphasizing interculturality and the relevance of Indigenous ways of knowing. Incorporating Indigenous knowledge into higher education is a multifaceted endeavor requiring curricular changes, community collaborations, and a shift in academic paradigms. While these initiatives can start on campus for scholars, innovative processes are also happening within Indigenous communities. Knowledge production is not unidirectional; it's multidirectional. Practices of collaboration like *ayni* can ground the methodologies of inclusive public humanities, and by embracing Indigenous knowledge systems, universities and Indigenous communities can foster a more inclusive, innovative, and fair society. In a truly public conception of the humanities, an important component of community-facing work must engage Indigenous communities in their own languages. Limiting the public humanities to the languages derived from imperialistic dynamics offers an ultimately insufficient understanding of the public and of the humanities.

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