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# Hemispheric Quechua: language education and reclamation within diasporic communities in the United States

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**Abstract:** Over the last two decades, the United States has increasingly become a site of Quechua language use and reclamation. Reclamation programs have emerged, both promoting the language and fostering community empowerment, particularly among Latinx youth. In this essay, we draw on our experiences as U.S.-based Quechua-language educators and organizers to explore the participation of diasporic Quechua reclamation movements in the global advance of the language. We frame these U.S.-based projects not as discrete entities, but as initiatives in constant connection with their counterparts in the Andes. This reflection piece provides a timeline of academic and community organizations in New York City, a global urban center with one of the largest bilingual Quechua-Spanish communities outside of the Andes. We conclude that these diasporic bottom-up language policy and planning (LPP) efforts are natural agents of dialogue on Quechua-language education and an integral part of the international Quechua reclamation movement.

**Keywords:** Andes; critical Latinx indigenities; indigenous diaspora; language policy and planning; language reclamation and revitalization; Quechua languages

**Resumen:** Durante las últimas dos décadas, en Estados Unidos, se han generado más espacios para el uso y reclamación cultural de las lenguas quechuas. Han surgido programas tanto para promover el idioma como para fomentar el empoderamiento comunitario mediante la lengua, particularmente entre jóvenes estadounidenses de herencia latinoamericana. Desde nuestras experiencias como educadores y gestores culturales, buscamos analizar la participación de diferentes movimientos diaspóricos de revitalización de lenguas indígenas en el avance global del quechua. Enmarcamos estos proyectos en los EE.UU. no como entidades aisladas, sino como dinámicas en constante conexión con los Andes. Este texto y reflexión proporcionan

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una cronología y recuento de organizaciones académicas y comunitarias en la ciudad de Nueva York, un centro urbano global con una de las comunidades bilingües quechua-español más grandes fuera de los Andes. Concluimos que estos esfuerzos de política y planificación lingüísticas desde la diáspora andina merecen ser también considerados como puntos de diálogo sobre la educación en lengua quechua y como parte integral de un movimiento internacional de reclamación cultural de esta lengua indígena.

**Palabras clave:** lenguas indígenas; quechua; Latinos en EE.UU; Diáspora indígena; políticas lingüísticas; decolonización; comunidades migrantes

“Never feeling more like an outsider and [also] never happier!” (1971, p. 85)  
Quechua intellectual José María Arguedas on New York City

In November 2018, the Quechua Alliance, an annual meeting of Quechua students and educators in the U.S., honored Elva Ambía with the Quechua Award for Lifetime Achievement. Elva had long been regarded as a leader in Quechua-language reclamation in New York City (NYC).<sup>1</sup> In her seventies, she founded the Quechua Collective of New York, starred in the award-winning documentary *Living Quechua* (2015), and published a children’s book, *Qoricha* (2017). For those of us lucky enough to have experienced Elva’s leadership first-hand, the award was more than a celebration of her achievements. There in the grandeur of the Perry World House at the University of Pennsylvania, it was a moment to reflect on all the activists, educators, and students past and present who made this moment possible. Elva emerged not as an exception but as an *umanchiq*<sup>2</sup> in a growing movement to reclaim Quechua in the diaspora.

In this reflective essay on Quechua language policy and planning (LPP) practice, we draw on our experiences as U.S.-based Quechua-language educators and organizers to provide not a comprehensive research study but a series of observations on the participation of diasporic Quechua reclamation movements in the global advance of the language. We employ Wesley Y. Leonard’s (2017) conceptualization of language reclamation, which he differentiates from “language revitalization” in its sole focus on language, 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” (p. 19). We frame these U.S.-based projects not as discrete entities, but as

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1 In an interview, Ambía spoke about receiving this award, “I feel so honored but I’m shocked that anyone would be interested in recognizing my work... I just wanted to have a school where I could teach Quechua and pass it on.” (Cárdenas 2018).

2 Quechua word for ‘leader.’

initiatives in connection with their counterparts throughout the Americas, in so becoming hemispheric. In maintaining a presence in the Andes and in other regions of the globe, Quechua can also be described as a global language. To explore these ideas further, this reflection piece provides a timeline of academic and community organizations in NYC, home to one of the largest bilingual Quechua-Spanish communities in the diaspora. While language education can take many forms, we focus on formalized language classes at the university level. We conclude that these diasporic bottom-up LPP efforts are natural agents of dialogue on Quechua-language learning and an integral part of the international Quechua reclamation movement.

## 1 Quechua: a global language

Quechua is the most widely spoken Indigenous language family in the Americas,<sup>3</sup> with millions of speakers in Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador, and substantial numbers in Argentina, Chile and Colombia (Adelaar 2004). Since the European invasion of South America in the early 16th century, ongoing colonial violence has altered the status of the language and its speakers. Social stigmatization and discrimination have prompted large-scale language shift from Quechua to Spanish. As a result, Quechua speakers often lack access to essential services in their language such as education, healthcare, and social justice. As Quechua scholar Serafin Coronel-Molina (1999) affirms, Indigenous people are perceived as “the other” (p. 60) and provided few opportunities. Such circumstances catalyzed relocation from rural to urban areas and migration to other countries in the mid-20th century. Many speakers now live in Andean cities such as Cochabamba, Cusco, Lima, or Quito, using Quechua in bilingual contexts (Howard 2011) thereby expanding its use into urban environments and diverse spaces.

Over the last two decades, various language reclamation initiatives have taken hold in the Andes, including music, television, social media, and government policies for language inclusion. These youth-led projects celebrate Indigenous cultures and challenge stereotypes that associate Quechua with rural areas, poverty, and ignorance. Virginia Zavala (2019) argues that these young Andes-based language 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” (p. 65). Outside of the region, Andean migrants and their

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<sup>3</sup> The Quechua language family and its varieties have various names: *Inga*, *Kichwa*, *Runa Shimi*, *Quechua*, *Runa Simi*. In this article, we will use the term Quechua to represent all of these.

descendants are joining language reclamation efforts in North America, Europe and Asia.<sup>4</sup> By increasing its visibility, these activists demonstrate that Quechua is a global language.

## 2 Andean culture and communities in the U.S.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Andean immigrants fled violence and economic hardship in their home countries, flocking to urban regions in the U.S. that faced a growing demand for factory workers. Andean enclaves emerged in major cities, including Los Angeles, Miami, Washington, D.C. and NYC.<sup>5</sup> Peruvians and Ecuadorians established important communities in the New York region.<sup>6</sup> Many of the Ecuadorians who migrated to NYC were Indigenous peoples from Cañar and Azuay provinces (Jokisch 2001). Peruvians made the New York-New Jersey region and South Florida their main destinations. As a result, an estimated 10,000 Quechua speakers live in the New York metropolitan area alone (All Peoples Initiative 2010).

While the initial goal of most Andean immigrants in NYC was economic stability, cultural organizations gradually emerged, including dance groups, unions, restaurants, religious fraternities, and celebrations. Beyond their status as immigrants, Quechua speakers navigate a society that often considers them Hispanic or Latino – pan-ethnic terms that erase cultural differences between Latin American countries and Indigeneity. Quechua, Andean and Indigenous identities overlap and conflict with Latinidad and U.S. Americanness. Andean migrants and their descendants negotiate identities and “undergo a number of transformations and dislocations from their premigration lives” (Pribilsky 2007). As such, these organizations became important platforms for cultural promotion and production, transmitting traditions to new U.S.-born generations. Of his experience, Quechua poet Fredy Roncalla remarks, “writing as an Andean thinker who lives in New York becomes a special situation: being able to notice that over the ruins of peripheral modernity and beyond nation-state borders, Andean enclaves extend to this and other economic ‘centers’ of the globalized world” (Roncalla 1998, p. 59). Given that Quechua-language projects continue to emerge outside of Tawantinsuyo,<sup>7</sup> we find it necessary to explore these initiatives in the U.S. and their connections with reclamation

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<sup>4</sup> Among these initiatives, we count the Quechua classes offered at the Cervantes Institute in Tokyo and the community-based group ‘Quechua en Madrid’ in Spain.

<sup>5</sup> Additionally, there are small groups who live in U.S. rural areas of Colorado, Utah and Wyoming. They work as sheep and alpaca shepherds (Krögel 2010).

<sup>6</sup> For example, Paterson NJ, Elizabeth NJ, Queens NY, The Bronx NY.

<sup>7</sup> “Inca Empire territory” in Quechua.

projects in the Andes,<sup>8</sup> paying particular attention to NYC as a center of Andean migration.

### 3 Diaspora Quechua-language initiatives

Over the last two decades, several community initiatives and educational programs have emerged in NYC to teach Quechua and foster connections between language speakers, learners and researchers in the U.S. and the Andes. These projects challenge stereotypes of Quechua as a local language and assert its global presence in NYC and beyond. These examples illustrate how Quechua-language programming addresses issues of language access (e. g. Quechua-English interpretation), creates space for identity formation and expression, and engages with academia.

Since 2008, the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies (CLACS) at New York University (NYU) has hosted Quechua language classes under the instruction of Peruvian Quechua professor and poet Odi Gonzales. NYU draws on a long history of Quechua-language teaching that finds its roots in the 1960s when Cornell University became one of the first U.S. universities to hold Quechua classes (Solá 1967). As there is diversity among varieties of Quechua spoken in the Andes, there too exists diversity among varieties taught in the diaspora. NYU teaches Southern Peruvian Quechua, which remains the most commonly taught variety in the US. While most students have an academic interest in the Andes, some have a personal connection with the language.<sup>9</sup> The Quechua program serves as a training ground for educators and activists and as an incubator for projects. CLACS provides space for student-run initiatives, including the Quechua Night series, podcast, and Runasimi Outreach Committee (ROC). Beyond NYU, their alumni have worked with the Quechua Collective of New York, Kichwa Hatari and May Sumak Quichwa Film Showcase.

In 2012, Peruvian Quechua activist Elva Ambía, folklorist Naomi Sturm, and NYU alumna and anthropologist Christine Mladic Janney founded the Quechua Collective of New York (QCNY, formerly the New York Quechua Initiative). When Elva visited her neighborhood library in Brooklyn, she was disappointed to find that there were no materials in Quechua. This experience fostered an interest in creating an organization to revitalize Quechua. While membership initially comprised NYU students and alumni, including Rachel Sprouse, the group now boasts Indigenous activists, students, and allies. QCNY welcomes Quechua speakers of all backgrounds and abilities, including heritage speakers and listeners as well as second-language

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8 Hornberger and King (2001) point out that is important to recognize that these Quechua language revitalization efforts, “have been far from uniform” (p.172).

9 O. Gonzales, interview, March 22, 2021.

learners. QCNV executes various programs, including *raymis andinos*,<sup>10</sup> bingo nights, and language classes in partnership with the non-profit Endangered Language Alliance.

In 2014, radio producer Segundo Angamarca, interpreter Luis A. Lema, and NYU alumnus and activist Charlie Uruchima, who are all Quechua, founded Kichwa Hatari, the first U.S.-based Kichwa-language radio program. Angamarca proposed to create space to discuss issues facing the Kichwa community and build relationships between Kichwa speakers in Ecuador and the U.S. by discussing issues of significance to both communities (Semple 2014). The program has invited Quechua activists and artists to participate in its broadcasts.

In 2015, NYU's CLACS and ROC founded the May Sumak Quichwa Film Showcase – the first US film festival to feature Quechua-language cinema. This annual gathering draws filmmakers from across the U.S. and the Andes, and facilitates film screenings, workshops and discussions. In 2019, they expanded to Ecuador.

There are also Quechua university and community initiatives beyond NYC. Stanford,<sup>11</sup> Penn,<sup>12</sup> Ohio State, Illinois,<sup>13</sup> Georgia, Texas, UCLA, and Colorado, currently offer Quechua language classes. However, many of these universities depend on graduate students or congressional funding<sup>14</sup> to carry out their initiatives. This dependency puts Quechua classes in a “precarious situation” (Mendoza-Mori 2017, p. 52) where, at any time, these programs could be terminated, despite a growing interest in Andean topics and Indigenous languages.<sup>15</sup> To make sure Quechua-language programs continue and break from the cyclical rise and fall of class offerings, universities need to view them as a high priority and invest their funds. As for community initiatives, Shana Inofuentes, Jennifer Albarracin Moya, Luz Coca and Monica Flores created The Quechua Project in Washington, DC. To do so, they built upon the efforts of first-generation Bolivian immigrants, including Julia García, a retired Virginia school teacher and director of Comité Pro-Bolivia.<sup>16</sup> In Tennessee, Luz Merissa Vargas Sayritupac leads Quechuata Rima, which creates educational content and facilitates trilingual gatherings on Andean culture in a virtual environment.

To accommodate the heightened attention to Quechua studies and initiatives, Quechua-language scholars Américo Mendoza-Mori, Carlos Molina-Vital and NYU Quechua alumna Gladys Camacho organized the first edition of the Quechua Alliance at the University of Pennsylvania in 2015. This intergenerational gathering brings

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10 'Andean Festivities'.

11 Stanford's Cafecito Quechua hosts community gatherings.

12 Penn's program has hosted Quechua Fulbright FLTA scholars since 2019.

13 Illinois hosts QINTI: open-access resources for Quechua language educators.

14 Higher Education Act' Title VI.

15 O. Gonzales: interview, March 22, 2021.

16 Comité Pro-Bolivia organizes Andean carnivals in the DC region and educational events in Quechua with the Smithsonian Institution.

together Quechua-language students, scholars and activists from across the U.S. Each year, the location changes (NYU: 2017, Ohio State: 2019). The intention is to celebrate Andean culture and showcase Quechua-language initiatives in a collaborative space. In addition to its annual meeting, the Quechua Alliance recognizes U.S.-based educators and language activities<sup>17</sup> and has given awards for social media activists in Peru and Bolivia (López 2020).

A common characteristic among these initiatives is the ongoing cultural exchange between the U.S.-based programming and their counterparts in the Andes. Kichwa Hatari builds bridges between Kichwa speakers in Ecuador and U.S. migrant communities. The Quechua Alliance facilitates connections by inviting presenters and artists from the Andes to perform in the U.S. Hence, these projects' audience and influence are not limited to the U.S. but have implications for the language reclamation initiatives in the Andes.

## 4 Final thoughts

We argue that Quechua-language reclamation initiatives in the diaspora are growing not as isolated projects but in collaboration with Andean-based programming. Diasporic Quechua-language initiatives serve local immigrant communities while also joining hemispheric conversations to advance the language. These language projects also facilitate identity-oriented experiences (Martínez and Train 2020) among the participants, particularly U.S. Latinx youth who are affirming their voices while navigating the challenges of a racialized society. Therefore, the existence of Quechua initiatives in the Global North becomes a powerful statement of their resistance, resilience, and community-building capacity.

Quechua is more than the Inkas or Machu Picchu. It can also mean dancing “Pirwaylla Pirway”<sup>18</sup> at a Quechua retreat in Brooklyn or attending international gatherings through the Quechua Alliance and May Sumak. By highlighting these initiatives, we reaffirm that Quechua is a global language. We focused our analysis primarily on the NYC metropolitan area as a significant cultural cluster that has facilitated the incubation of various Quechua creative projects. These efforts foster a more multicultural society, where claiming multiple identities is no longer seen as a contradiction. As Hornberger (2008) argues, working with Indigenous languages is not “about bringing a language back, but rather bringing it forward” (p. 2). Thus, these initiatives allow Quechua languages and their speakers to continue advancing wherever they go.

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17 Recipients of Quechua Alliance's Quechua Lifetime Achievement Award: Clodoaldo Soto (2015), Julia García (2016), Kichwa Hatari (2017), Elva Ambía (2018), Luis Morató (2019).

18 An Andean carnival dance.

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