

Quechua in the Globe, a conversation with Américo Mendoza-Mori

By Paul Montjoy Forti

I met Américo Mendoza a long time ago in Lima city. Since then, I have been following his work with interest. Now, at Harvard University, he is developing innovative academic and community initiatives with the Quechua diaspora in the U.S. We met again in the context of the first Andean-Amazonian Symposium at Rutgers University. We are in New Brunswick, and it is a beautiful spring day.

After the independence in 1821, Peru adopted Spanish as the official language. What impact did this have on Quechua speakers?

The imposition of Spanish after the independence of Peru marked a continuation of the colonial structures: linguistic hierarchies persisted and were institutionalized. This marginalized Quechua speakers. Language was (and continues to be) used as a tool of social and cultural exclusion. The violence here has different layers. It's not only physical but structural and epistemic, involving the silencing of knowledge systems, community practices, oral traditions, and cosmologies related to Indigenous languages.

When the state normalizes Spanish as the only key to upward mobility, education, governance, and modernity, Indigenous languages become stigmatized, and speakers face discrimination. This produces linguistic traumas: entire generations are taught to feel ashamed and may see abandoning their languages to survive socially and economically.

I studied high school in the north of Peru, and I never had the opportunity to learn Quechua, but I was able to learn English. This is a repeated story among Peruvians...

You are right! This is a repeated pattern in many urban areas of Peru, and it reflects the (post)colonial legacies embedded within educational policies and language ideologies. Although Quechua has been an official language in Peru since 1975, in practice, the educational system has not implemented structural changes to meaningfully include Quechua in the national curricula.

While English is seen as key to global citizenship, Quechua is often deemed irrelevant. Changing this requires different pedagogical frameworks in Peru and recognizing that Indigenous knowledge is not just about diversity but is essential to innovation, sustainability, and justice.

How necessary is it for artists, intellectuals, scholars and writers to have a public role in Peru?

Academics, artists, and intellectuals have a profound responsibility in societies like Peru, where historic injustices and exclusions continue. Scholars must co-create spaces in which Indigenous peoples are agents of knowledge and visibility, push for policy changes that promote Indigenous languages instruction in all schools, funding for language revitalization programs, and greater representation of Indigenous voices in participation, media, and politics. Universities and research centers also need to prioritize Indigenous-led projects and include Indigenous scholars, writers, and activists as peer experts.

The Quechua language is alive. How is the Quechua-speaking migrant experience when they arrive in the U.S.?

Quechua speakers are a transnational and diasporic community beyond the Andes. There are estimated to be over 10,000 Quechua speakers in the New York City area, and there are thousands of Quechua speakers in urban areas of Peru, Ecuador and Bolivia. It is imperative to consider that Quechua is surviving, evolving, and asserting itself in immigrant contexts. In the U.S., Quechua-speaking migrants often navigate through invisibility. First, many people get into a generalized “Latino” category, erasing their Indigeneity. Second, they face linguistic marginalization from English and from other Spanish speakers. This double invisibility leads to problems in education, healthcare access, and legal representation.

How do Quechua communities enrich U.S. culture?

Quechua communities enrich U.S. cultural life. They maintain traditional practices, organize community events, and revitalize the language. Through collaborations with universities, public schools, and cultural organizations, Quechua speakers promote intercultural dialogue, challenge monolingual ideologies, and promote knowledge systems rooted in reciprocity, ecology, and resilience.

Young generations reclaim and celebrate Quechua identity in the diaspora, examples include bilingual spoken word, hip-hop in Quechua, visual art, and community organizing. They are not just preserving a past, they are crafting a future in dialogue with their counterparts in the Andes.

Your own experience as a Quechua speaker working at Harvard is inspiring. What projects are you currently working on?

At Harvard, we were able to develop the Quechua Initiative on Global Indigeneity, which creates spaces on campus for Indigenous languages and knowledge systems to be visible and celebrated by organizing events, exhibitions, and workshops with Indigenous artists and scholars. We build partnerships with community organizations and mentor students who want to integrate Indigenous perspectives into their academic work. Something similar happened at the University of Pennsylvania, where I started the Quechua program.

I work on public-facing projects about intercultural education and the visibility of Indigenous languages in migration contexts. We support students and educators working in school districts with high populations of Indigenous Latin American migrants. Another project is the Quechua Alliance, a grassroots platform for educators, students, activists, and artists who since 2015 have organized annual gatherings at different U.S. universities to highlight the vitality of Quechua cultures. We create a space for discussion, learning, celebration, and include Quechua workshops, music, panels, and even proposals for language justice work.

These efforts fight against the notion that Quechua is peripheral. My goal is to center them in the educational and cultural discourse. This work wouldn’t be possible without collective efforts. I

continue learning every day from the educators, students, activists, artists, and community leaders who are keeping Quechua, and other Indigenous languages, alive.

I want to end this interview by asking you for a personal reflection about the current situation of Quechua communities.

I'm inspired by the younger generations who are reclaiming Quechua through music, poetry, social media, and education. Technology is an aspect we need to put significant attention on, since this is where language use is and will be prevalent. This renewed visibility is powerful, but it must be matched with real support from institutions and academia.

Quechua language carries worldviews, values, and histories. Supporting its speakers means recognizing their rights, their knowledge, and their role in shaping more just, inclusive societies. Therefore, in the end it is about recognizing language justice as a key component in promoting more democratic societies.