

February 12, 2020 | By Anthony King

International Symposium at UC San Diego to Highlight Indigenous Voices

More than 20 Indigenous communities will be represented on campus Feb 24, 25

The greater San Diego-Tijuana region will get a rare opportunity to engage with contemporary Indigenous writing, from spoken-word performances and poetry readings by the authors themselves, to book signings, a film screening and special exhibition of material held at UC San Diego. The events are part of a larger international symposium addressing the importance and impact of Indigenous language and literature.

Organized by Dr. Gloria Chacón and Dr. Kathryn Walkiewicz, both of the UC San Diego Department of Literature, and Latin American Studies Librarian Dr.

Sarah A. Buck Kachaluba, the complete conference will see more than 20 Indigenous communities represented, Feb. 24 and 25.

“We want to dispel the popular and conventional assumption that Spanish and British colonial powers succeeded in eradicating Indigenous languages through colonialism,” said Chacón, whose book, “Indigenous Cosmolectics: Kab’awil and the Making of Maya and Zapotec Literatures” was published in 2018, followed by a co-edited anthology “Indigenous Interfaces: Spaces, Technology, and Social Networks in Mexico and Central America,” published in 2019.

“Of course, Indigenous people use colonial languages to create literature, but creating in Indigenous languages is also a political and aesthetic act,” she said.



From left, Calixta Gabriel Xiquín (Maya Kaqchikel), Jorge Cocom Pech (Maya) and Dr. Inés Hernández-Avila (Nez Perce/Tejana) will be participating in the symposium and related events. (Courtesy symposium planning committee)

Understanding the ‘Double Gaze’ of Indigenous Poets

In her book “Indigenous Cosmolectics,” Department of Literature associate professor Dr. Gloria E. Chacón argues that Indigenous writing is a key component to expressing cultural and political autonomy. [Read the Q&A »](#)

After declaring 2019 as the International Year of Indigenous Languages, the United Nations expanded their campaign of raising awareness and integrating indigenous languages into larger society by announcing the very first International Decade of Indigenous Languages, to begin in 2022. Two Indigenous languages go extinct every month, UN officials said.

“The goals of this declaration are twofold: to raise awareness about the endangerment that they face as well as underline their contribution to the world’s diversity,” Chacón said. “Presenting and studying the works of indigenous poets exposes our community to the philosophy, the aesthetics and the politics of Indigenous communities within the U.S. as well as south of the border. It is also about asserting their resilience.”

In conjunction with the “Indigenous Writers and Their Critics” symposium, the UC San Diego Library will display “Indigenous Languages and Literatures of the America(s): An Exhibit Honoring Indigenous Writings from Turtle Island to Abiyala.” On display in Geisel Library through March 15, the exhibit will use materials from the Library’s collections to illustrate early to contemporary Indigenous works, including pre-Colombian pictorial and phonetic or alphabetic writing, Indigenous-Spanish works created by colonizing priests, Indigenous-to-Spanish dictionaries, and contemporary Indigenous literature, many written by authors participating in the symposium.

“The range of materials is fascinating as the exhibit items were created by different actors for different purposes, resulting in intended and unintended consequences,” said Buck Kachaluba. “For example, the chronicles penned by early-modern priests, dictionaries and instructional materials created to teach Spanish to Indigenous peoples, and primers printed by 20th century Latin American governments all served to preserve Indigenous language and culture, even as they sought to modernize and often eradicate Indigenous practices and traditions.”

In addition to eight panel discussions featuring top Indigenous language and literature researchers from the United States and Mexico, highlights of the inaugural conference include:

Monday, Feb. 24 — Geisel Library, Seuss Room

- “Ülkantun” (songs in Mapudungun) by graduate student Manuel Carrión-Lira and Calibán Catrileo, a Mapuche poet
- Poetry reading by Nataylia Richardson (Luiseño)

- Reading of “A few Notes on Grief” by Casandra Lopez (Tongva)
- Film screening and discussion of “Waaki,” with Victor Masayesva (Hopi)
- Evening poetry reading at The Loft at UC San Diego featuring 11 Indigenous writers, with concurrent book signing of “El sueño de la flor” by Marisol Ceh Moo (Maya)

Tuesday, Feb. 25 — UC San Diego Cross Cultural Center

- “The Experience of Indigenous Diaspora and Literature: A conversation” with Judith Santopietro (Nahua), Francisco Icala (K’iche’) and Felipe Lopez (Zapotec)
- Book signing of “Tiawanaku” by Judith Santopietro (Nahua)
- Interactive performance of “Ixkin: Word, Movement, and Relational Worlds” by Tohil Fidel Brito (Ixil and Achi) and María Regina Firmino-Castillo (Nahua/Pipil and Southern European ancestry)
- Evening poetry reading at The Loft at UC San Diego featuring 11 Indigenous writers

The Audrey Geisel University Librarian Dr. Erik Mitchell will open the symposium Feb. 24 at 8:45 a.m.; UC San Diego Intertribal Resource Center director Elena Hood, Ed.D. will give opening remarks Feb. 25 at 9:15 a.m. Access the [full schedule, including times and a complete list of participants \(PDF\)](#); all aspects of the symposium are free, open to the public and do not require registration.

Paraphrasing Creek-Cherokee scholar Craig Womack, Chacón said that without Indigenous literatures, there wouldn’t be “American Literature” or “Latin-American Literature.”

“Before 1776, the first stories in the continent were Indigenous ones, whether these were oral or represented in various writing systems like Mayan glyphs,” she said. “My hope is that everyone gain a deeper understanding of the political, social, economic and cultural conditions Indigenous nations and Indigenous communities grapple with, as interpreted and articulated by the poets.”

MEDIA CONTACT

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