

**In the Wake of Insurgency: Testimony and the Politics of Memory and Silence in Oaxaca**

by

Bruno E. Renero-Hannan

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
(Anthropology and History)  
in the University of Michigan  
2018

Doctoral Committee

Professor Ruth Behar, Co-Chair  
Associate Professor Sueann Caulfield, Co-Chair  
Professor Paul C. Johnson  
Professor Stuart Kirsch  
Professor Richard Turits, College of William and Mary

Bruno E. Renero-Hannan

vago@umich.edu

ORCID iD: 0000-0003-1529-7946

© Bruno E. Renero-Hannan 2018

*Para Elena, Louisa, y Amelia*

*Y para Elvira*

## Acknowledgements

It takes a village, and I have gained many debts in the elaboration of this dissertation. At every step of the way I have benefited from guidance and support of family, friends, colleagues, teachers, and *compas*. To begin with, I would like to thank my advisors and the co-chairs of my dissertation committee. Ruth Behar helped me find the voices I was looking for, and a path. I am grateful for her generosity as a reader, story-listener, and mentor, as well as her example as a radical practitioner of ethnography and a gifted writer. I came to know Sueann Caulfield as an inspiring teacher of Latin American history, whose example of commitment to teaching and research I carry with me; as co-chair, she guided me through multiple drafts of this work, offering patient encouragement and shrewd feedback, and motivating me to complete it. Stuart Kirsch was a supportive advisor throughout my early years at Michigan and fieldwork, introducing me to social movement studies and helping to shape the focus of my research. Paul Johnson welcomed me into the Anthro-History Program and provided vital support at key moments, from the core seminar through the defense. I have consistently been amazed by his creative intellect and ability to cast light on entire color palettes in the works of others, whether canonical texts or workshop drafts, that were hidden even to its author. Richard Turits challenged my thinking about the history of revolutions and the left in Latin America, and introduced me to the vast world of Caribbean history and politics, encouraging me to write with precision and to think critically about language. I also thank Bruce Mannheim for graciously accepting an impromptu role in my defense, and for blowing my mind, time and again, with his erudition, unorthodox thinking and charm. I am thankful to each of them for making my dissertation defense a memorable and illuminating discussion of past and future paths for my work.

At the University of Michigan, I am grateful to Rebecca Scott for serving on my prelim exam committee and instilling in me her passion for colonial history, as well as for her inspiring example of equal parts grace and rigor in research and in teaching. Thanks also to David Frye for sharing some of his sharp insight and vast knowledge about Mexico and Latin America. As a graduate student at the University of Michigan, I benefited from the guidance and support of faculty and staff members including Julie Skurski, Fernando Coronil, Alaina Lemon, Victoria Langland, Jean Hébrard, Kenneth Mills, Catherine Brown, Jesse Hoffnung-Garskoff, LaKisha Simmons, Farina Mir, Jennifer Robertson, Diana Denney, Laurie Marx, Kathleen King, Sue Douglas, Susan Kaiser, and Emma Flores, among others. I also remain indebted to my undergraduate mentors and teachers at the University of Texas at Austin, who inspired and encouraged me to pursue this path, particularly, Charles Hale, Shannon Speed, and Brian Stross. Thanks also to Nadya and Dan Clayton, André Ayala, Erin Hazel, Mary Agnew, Chris Lueck, and Craig Cravens.

In Ann Arbor the companionship, warmth, and wisdom of many friends and *compas* have been indispensable: Chris Estrada, Shana Melnysyn, Ángela Pérez-Villa, Regev Nathansohn, Zehra Hashmi, Jennifer Bowles, and Federico Pous were always there for me when it mattered. I am deeply grateful to each of them, in addition to many years of friendship, for reading and commenting on drafts of my work and supporting me through the challenging final weeks of writing. The list of friends and *compas* who have accompanied and helped me throughout the years of this endeavor is too long, for which I am fortunate. Above all, I thank Alex Husted (Momo), Beth Gardner, Ben Shepard, Luciana Aenasoaie, Edgar-Jack Taylor, Davide Orsini, Cyrus O'Brien, Nicholas Q. Emlen, Vanessa Díaz, Bertrand Metton, Esteban Rozo, John Mathias, Cindy Milstein, Salman Hussain, Lily Ellis, Hedieh Alavi, Anna Wood, Alana Rodriguez, Laura Herbert, Richard Stahler-Sholk, Amelia Frank-Vitale, Martín Vega, Dan Nemser, Eduardo García, Ed Trager, Alejo Stark, Erica Pelta-Feldman, Richard Reinhardt, Georgia Ennis, Ximena Gomez, Joseph Viscomi, Katherine Fultz, Gabi Koch, Jane Lynch, Lamin Manneh, Razvan Iordache, and, of course, Anca

Dobrinou. I am grateful to various collective spaces and their members for providing me with a sense of community and purpose during my time in Michigan, particularly, the Ethnography-as-Activism collective, the Michigan Solidarity Network with Mexico, Solidarity and Defense Huron Valley, and the Bad Cats.

This work would not be possible without the hospitality and generosity of the oaxaqueñas and oaxaqueños (and oaxaqueñoas) in Oaxaca and San Agustín Loxicha who welcomed me into their lives, and who taught me so much about their lives, their struggles, their sense of dignity, and the significance of community. Above all, I wish to thank Álvaro Sebastián, Abraham García, Zacarías García, Agustín Luna, Fortino Enriquez who graciously shared their stories with me in Ixcotel and ETLA prisons, and to other former prisoners from Loxicha who shared their stories with me elsewhere.

In Loxicha I am especially grateful to two inspiring women who welcomed me to the pueblo and taught me most of what I know about Xiche culture and ‘reality,’ my comadre Teresa Ramírez and Minerva García. I am thankful to the Sebastián and García families, whose kitchen tables became schools and sanctuaries to me. I am also grateful to the municipal authorities (2011-2013) and parish authorities for opening their doors and archives to me and for facilitating several interviews and community visits. Special thanks to Delfino García for the stories and treasures, and to Lico, Tere, Chuy, Ángel, and Chilo for many joys and for our walk down to the rancho. Thanks also to Fidel Zurita, Salomé Sebastián, Macario Sánchez, Chucho, Miguel Almaraz, la Maestra Minerva Mendoza, my neighbors from Ciudad Neza, Alma and Juan, Radio La Tejonera, Porfirio Luna (“El Burro”), and everyone working at the comedor with doña Bety. I regret that I am incapable of naming all the other people in Loxicha who helped me in so many ways and shaped this project.

In and around Oaxaca City I have been fortunate to have extraordinary friends, compas, and colleagues. I am especially grateful to Rita Jiménez (La Chata), Leonardo Vargas (mi compadre Tlahui), Isabela Matus, Adriana Luna, mis tías Tina Prado y Mary del Valle, Donaciana Antonio, Erika Sebastián,

Eric Bazán, Andrés Bianchetto, Noelia García, Gabriela Jiménez, La Chivis, Gustavo Esteva, Arturo Guerrero, Jaime Luna, Parastoo Mesri, Marcos Leyva, Juan Sosa, Sara Méndez, Alba Cruz, Isaac Torres, Juan Carlos Martínez, Ronald Waterbury, Miguel Angel Elorza, Felipe Martínez Soriano, and Marisol Ricardez and Araceli Ramírez. In Oaxaca I am also indebted to various collectives and organizations for welcoming and supporting me including Universidad de la Tierra Oaxaca, Unitierra Huitzo, La Voz de los Zapotecos Xiches en Prisión, Espacio por la Verdad y Justicia en Oaxaca, Movimiento por la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad, Círculo Veredas Autónomas, Colectivo Barro Negro, and the many incarnations of Bésame Muxe. Israel Ochoa and Y’aha Sandoval, the longtime legal defenders of the Loxicha prisoners kindly granted me access to their personal archive and shared their insight. I regret not being able to include this material in the present thesis, but I look forward to incorporating it into later work. And special thanks to “Aureliano” and his family.

In other corners of Mexico and the United States, I am grateful to Adela Cedillo, Laura Castellanos, Tita Radilla, María Luisa Rosal, John Gibler, Dawn Paley, Kristin Norget, Paul Eiss, Benjamin Smith, Michael Flaherty, Wendy Carter-Veale, and Lourdes Gutierrez. In Mexico City y entre la diáspora chilanga, a lifetime of thanks to Nilo, Buga, Buca, Ángel, Camus, Elenita, Diana, and Paola, my oldest friends.

Finally, I would like to thank my parents, Elena and Gabriel, for the sacrifices they have made so that I could find myself here. This thesis marks the culmination of a journey that begins with my own migration from Mexico to the United States, which are but the latest episodes in a sequence of trans-border lives and migrations undertaken by parents and grandparents (para no irnos lejos): from Oaxaca and Michoacán to the Valley of Mexico, from West Virginia and Colorado to a mining town in Chihuahua, from Mexico City to Texas, and many times back. I am also grateful to my sister, Louisa, for looking out for me, desde siempre, and for getting it. Thanks also to Juquilita, Beethoven, and other unpaid agitators.

The research and writing of this thesis was generously funded by various institutions including the Doctoral Program in Anthropology and History, the Rackham Graduate School, the International Institute, the Center for the Education of Women, and the Sweetland Center for Writing at the University of Michigan.

-\*-



## Preface

### A Tale of Two Prison Visits

The first time I stepped inside of Ixcotel prison—as the Central Penitentiary of the State of Oaxaca, on the outskirts of Oaxaca City, is commonly known—was in the context of a public, yet intentionally small, solidarity act with an indigenous activist and long-time political prisoner named Álvaro Sebastián Ramírez. The solidarity event, which took place in October 2012, consisted of entering Ixcotel prison—registering ourselves as “friends” of Álvaro in the prison’s administrative offices and walking through several security lines and invasive inspections—in order to meet with Álvaro, face to face, and to sit with him in a small circle and exchange words and stories for the span of a few hours, briefly subverting the boundaries that kept us on different sides of the prison wall, and momentarily rupturing the ordinary flow of time and life for him and for us.

Around ten of us had gathered outside the gates of the prison that Sunday morning, after having spent the previous day, Saturday, together at a modestly attended public forum held in the auditorium and classrooms of a teachers’ college (*escuela normal*) in the city. Dedicated to the cause of Álvaro’s freedom, the forum also highlighted the voices and situations of other indigenous political prisoners in Mexico who, like Álvaro and the event’s organizers, identified as adherents to the “Sixth Declaration of the Lacandón Jungle,” thereby, forming part of a loose network of Zapatista activists then known as The Other Campaign

(*La Otra Campaña*).<sup>1</sup> It featured a call-in from Álvaro inside Ixcotel, as well as the narration of personal accounts (*testimonios*) by relatives of Álvaro and former prisoners, presentations by lawyers and activists, and the readings out-loud of letters from other indigenous prisoners in Oaxaca and Chiapas.<sup>2</sup> The forum concluded with roundtable discussions and an invitation by the organizers, among certain trusted participants at the event, to join a small group visit to Ixcotel prison the following day.

Álvaro firmly identified at this point as an adherent of the Sixth, linking his current struggle to a wider network of Zapatista activists in Mexico and other countries, as well as the struggles of other indigenous prisoners, such as the Mayan *Base de Apoyo Zapatista*, Alberto Patishtán in Chiapas. However, in spite of this, Álvaro's political and legal fortunes and reputation remained indelibly linked to an older identity as a "Loxicha prisoner" and, thus, to this group's fraught association, in public discourse and in their sentences, with Mexico's other significant guerrilla movement of the nineties, the Popular Revolutionary Army (*Ejército Popular Revolucionario*, EPR), which they were accused of belonging to in the 1990s, though all of them denied the allegations for which they were sentenced.

Álvaro was currently one of seven Loxicha prisoners who remained incarcerated in Ixcotel and Etlá prisons since the late nineties. Initially numbering in the hundreds, the Loxicha prisoners were a group Zapotec prisoners from the municipality of San Agustín Loxicha, in the mountains near the coast of Oaxaca, who were arrested in in the late nineties, during the Mexican government's silent war of counterinsurgency against rural communities suspected of harboring or supporting guerrillas. The Loxicha prisoners—*los*

---

<sup>1</sup> Adherents to the "Sixth Declaration of the Lacandón Jungle" (henceforth, adherents of The Sixth) are supporters of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) who "adhere" to the analysis and open-ended principles of the EZLN's "Sixth Declaration of the Lacandón Jungle;" formerly known as "adherents to the Other Campaign" (2005-2013) until the cancellation of the latter, in favor of "The Sixth." Not to be confused with members of the EZLN or Zapatista "bases," the Mayan inhabitants of the Zapatista autonomous communities in Chiapas. EZLN, "Sexta Declaración de La Selva Lacandona," *Enlace Zapatista* (blog), 2005, <http://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2005/06/30/sexta-declaracion-de-la-selva-lacandona/>.

<sup>2</sup> Second Forum Against Political Prison and for the Freedom of Álvaro Sebastián Ramírez (*II Foro Contra la Prisión Política y por la Libertad de Álvaro Sebastián Ramírez*), organized by The Voice of the Zapotec Xiches in Prison Collective (*La Voz de los Zapotecos Xiches en Prisión*) and the Network Against Repression and for Solidarity (*Red Contra la Represión y por la Solidaridad*, RvsR), Centro Regional de Educación Normal de Oaxaca, CRENO, Oaxaca de Juárez, October 6, 2012.

*presos Loxicha*—became *presos políticos*, in part, because the Mexican state accused them of belonging to the EPR, a Marxist-Leninist guerrilla organization purportedly seeking to overthrow the state. But it was also because many of these arrests specifically targeted Zapotec activists and community organizers who were part of an indigenous political organization that, just a few weeks before the arrests began, had forced the state governor to the negotiating table by organizing hundreds of Zapotecs to march from Loxicha to Oaxaca City, briefly blocking access to the international airport in the process, and then occupying the central plaza in front of the state government offices for several days.

Álvaro was arrested on December 15, 1998, and forcibly “disappeared” and tortured by police for several days, before being sent to prison, along with hundreds of other mostly indigenous men from Loxicha who were persecuted and incarcerated in the late nineties. This slew of arrests took place during the Mexican government’s silent war of counterinsurgency against rural guerrillas across several states of southern Mexico, particularly, Oaxaca, Chiapas, and Guerrero. The authorities accused Álvaro and the other Loxicha prisoners of belonging to the Ejército Popular Revolucionario (Popular Revolutionary Army, EPR) and of participating in deadly guerrilla attacks against soldiers and police in 1996. The prisoners and their families denied these accusations and staged an occupation of Oaxaca’s main plaza for years in protest, from 1997 to 2001. They alleged that the government utilized the EPR as a facile excuse to repress a strong and popular indigenous political movement in San Agustín Loxicha by imprisoning activists and labeling an entire indigenous community as “terrorists.”

The handful of sympathizers who visited Álvaro in Ixcotel Prison that October morning were mostly in our twenties or thirties, aside from two teachers in their late fifties and Álvaro’s youngest daughter (of three) was an adolescent going to school in Oaxaca. Erika, the middle sister and main engine driving the public campaign for Álvaro’s freedom, was born in Loxicha had but lived most of her life in the Central

Valleys of Oaxaca. The others included organizers in Oaxaca City, a Mazatec activist from the northern part of the state, a couple of anarchists and prison abolitionists from Mexico City and Chiapas, and the author, an American-Mexican from Mexico City attending graduate school in Michigan and currently living between San Agustín Loxicha and Oaxaca City.

Disregarding a few mostly innocuous encounters with jails, it was my first time stepping inside of a prison.<sup>3</sup> I felt nervous, waiting in the street outside the prison gates for the others to arrive, near the home-store fronts of businesses catering to visitors to the prison, prisoners (through their visitors), and guards—and I tried to keep out of sight of the intimidating gazes of the black-uniformed state police clutching their large gray shotguns at the gate. I was afraid they might have arrived early and gone in without me. Eventually, the others arrived together (I felt a little envious of their comradery, although I understood their caution towards new faces, doing this kind of solidarity work). Even as I did my best to hide it, I was still nervous standing in the “customs” line, one of several lines to get into the prison, speaking with one of the main organizers of the event, a young adherent of The Sixth with an impressive knowledge of penal law. I asked him, as we waited in line, if he had attended law school, which elicited his surprised laughter in response. Not at all, he replied, but they and Álvaro found themselves obligated to practice “*auto-defensa jurídica*,” denoting a do-it-yourself sort of “legal self-defense,” yet with the added connotation of *auto-defensas* in the sense of armed rural community defense brigades.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> First time inside of a functioning prison, that is: otherwise, I could mention the former “Black Palace” of Lecumberri, the Porfirian panopticon prison where successive PRI governments locked away their political prisoners (railroad strikers in the late fifties, participants in the 1968 student movement, and numerous leftist guerrillas throughout the seventies), along with more nefarious inmates, until it ceased to function as a prison—in order to become the home of Mexico City’s Archivo General de la Nación (National Archive), where I had, in fact, spent many hours over several weeks, reading in the stacks, in a hallway (Gallery 1) of one of the spider-shaped edifice’s arms, sitting at one of several long wooden tables lined up between the former cells of the prison, reading the testimonies of former political prisoners, among other recently declassified documents of the PRI’s silent war against the radical left throughout the twentieth century (the archive ends around 1982, with the demise of the ruling party’s secret police, the Dirección Federal de Seguridad (Federal Security Agency, DFS)). See chapter 1.

<sup>4</sup> *Auto-defensas* were then emerging as a serious phenomenon in the states of Michoacán, Guerrero, and others—taking a lesson from the playbook of rural guerrillas, yet now in response to the overwhelming power of organized crime syndicates operating in much of the country, and suffocating local communities with extortion, exploitation, and terror.

Most, perhaps all, of the others in the group, other than me, had spent time inside prisons before: Álvaro's children and a couple of his close supporters had been visiting him in different prisons since the late nineties; others in the group had been involved in "prisoner support," as part of their activism, in other parts of Mexico. I was impressed as I witnessed their confident approach to the long security lines, the invasive pat-downs, or the guards' openly hostile treatment of most of the visitors. Further on, I would learn that this stoicism was a survival strategy developed, in some cases, over a lifetime—particularly for the two young women, Álvaro's daughters, who had grown up constantly entering and leaving the prison to visit their father, since their youth or, in the case of the youngest, since birth. Their stoicism occluded that which it was meant to be a defense against: the realities of regular harassment and abuse by the police. Harassment was the norm for most visitors, although it was visibly and unequally gendered and classed: male lawyers and bureaucrats, for instance, tended to receive far better treatment. Standing under the tin roof of the two customs lines—one for men and one for women—I noticed that the number of women standing in line was far greater than that of the men: The women's line was many times longer and moved much slower, as the majority of the women carried bags of food or basic household goods. The majority were visibly poor or working class, and many of them appeared to be indigenous, based on their clothing, hairstyles, or overheard bits of conversation. Some women carried tall bundles of dry tortillas, bulk quantities of instant coffee or sugar, or huge vats of soup (which the guards would rummage through with huge spoons or latex gloves, looking for contraband), along with other treats or necessities for their brothers, partners, fathers—and, in some cases, mothers or daughters, as this was a co-ed prison. In addition to the bags of food and products, many also carried infants and toddlers. After the customs line came the pat-down behind a closed door, then the metal detectors, the armored turnstiles, another line, finger print scanners, more sets of gates, and more waiting, until you get to a room where the guards check you in and take your official identification card, in exchange for a plastic poker chip with a number on it, which you hold onto until you pick up your

identification upon leaving. Then, you're in the prison—and there is a lot of commotion during visiting hours.

Most of the activists with me knew each other well, from years of organizing through Zapatista solidarity networks in Oaxaca, Chiapas, Mexico City, and elsewhere. I had recently met Álvaro's daughter and some of his other close supporters at a solidarity forum meant to raise awareness about Álvaro's case and those of other indigenous political prisoners who were adherents to The Sixth. The forum was organized by adherents to the Sixth, within the Red Contra la Represión y por la Solidaridad (Network Against Repression and for Solidarity, RvsR). Organizers and participants discussed the legal status of the prisoners and the legal and political strategies they were employing to fight for their freedom; former prisoners spoke about their experiences; others read letters and testimonies written by different prisoners addressed to the participants of the forum; at one point, Álvaro called from his cell phone inside Ixcotel and addressed the audience of several dozen people. Family members of different prisoners also spoke at the event, including Álvaro's daughter, Erika Sebastián Luis, who spoke passionately and eloquently about her father's case and his trajectory as an indigenous organizer and a teacher in Loxicha and, later, as prisoner and adherent of The Sixth. She also spoke about her own experience of growing up with a father in prison, which forced her to become a *luchadora*, a fighter, for the political prisoners at the age of fifteen. That was in the late nineties, when she and dozens of other women and children from Loxicha occupied Oaxaca City's main plaza, the Zócalo, with an encampment that lasted longer than four years.

During a break in the activities of the forum, I approached Erika and introduced myself. I thanked her for organizing this event and for sharing her testimony and analysis. I had met many activists and organizers working on prisoner support, with the Loxicha prisoners or other political or vulnerable prisoners in Mexico; yet few had impressed me as these activists had—a first impression that did not change in retrospect—for their deeply committed and principled approach to their political work, extending beyond

prisoner support. Among other things, I was impressed by their Zapatista-inflected insistence that activists on the outside were not fighting *for* prisoners, but *with* them; that the prisoners themselves must be the subjects (not the objects) of their struggles for emancipation, a process which, in their view, required a rigorous re-constitution of prisoners as historical and political subjects.

I told Erika that I hoped to meet her father and the other Loxicha prisoners, and that I wished to ask them if they would be interested in sharing some of their stories and experiences with me, to collaborate in the recording of their oral histories. I had already been researching some of the history and context surrounding the Loxicha conflict that led to the men's incarceration, for several months, as part of a politically engaged anthropology and history research project for my doctoral dissertation about social movements and historical memory in Oaxaca. I also mentioned that I had recently taken up living in the Zapotec community of San Agustín Loxicha—an hour or so walk from the village where she and her father were both born—in order to learn more about the origins of the prisoners and their prior struggles as indigenous activists in the eighties and nineties, the social repercussions of violence and incarceration on their communities, and the controversial legacies of their activism and persecution.

I told Erika, as I would later explain to the prisoners themselves, that my interest in this project came from a position of solidarity with the prisoners and with the struggles of indigenous communities in Oaxaca. That is, I wished to conduct research around their stories inasmuch as possible in ways that might benefit or, at the least, be relevant to the prisoners, themselves, their allies, and to others engaged in similar struggles in other places. In this case, my sense of commitment also entailed being very attentive and respectful to the delicate political etiquette of prisoner solidarity work, due to the vulnerability of the prisoners, as well as their relatives and supporters, given the history of persecution and political repression.

Even if they were not interested in recording their oral histories, I was also happy to simply go visit them, without taking anything from them (much like an extractive industry, anthropology has often taken

the form of one-sided extraction for the benefit of the anthropologist). I did not want to presume that any of the prisoners would necessarily have any desire or interest in speaking with me. However, I also knew, from speaking to other longtime supporters of the Loxicha prisoners and other prisoner solidarity activists in different countries, that a simple visit, some conversation, or just a simple letter—that is, communication, intimacy, and human interaction, in general—were things that tended to gain tremendous significance for people who are locked up and separated from most of society. Pedestrian though these actions may seem, visits and the exchange of phone calls and letters are among the fundamental elements of prisoner solidarity work and care.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, I wanted to be attentive and respectful of their desires and their boundaries, given the profoundly uneven power relation between free persons and prisoners in a penal institution, as well as those dividing us along class and ethnic lines.

However, I did hope that they would be receptive to the idea of sharing their stories—for its interpersonal dimensions, such as its potentially cathartic and therapeutic effects (though I am no therapist and harbored no illusions of being a savior) or just the emotional satisfaction that many people feel in storytelling, in addition to *testimonio*'s cultural and political potential in confronting silence, obscurity and *desmemoria*, by amplifying their voices and casting light on their embattled and controversial histories and experiences, as free persons and as long-term prisoners. Five out of the seven prisoners eventually agreed to be interviewed, four of whom I ended up interviewing and visiting many times over the following years, even after their release—but that was later—while two of them politely declined. I elaborate further on these two prisoners and their silences in the epilogue.

Erika listened carefully to what I said, and then discussed it briefly among her *compas* (comrades or colleagues; short for *compañeras/os*). She then informed me that I was welcome to accompany them on

---

<sup>5</sup> In my experience, prisoner support activists sometimes overlook these small acts, in favor of flashier expressions of solidarity, as it can be difficult for someone outside to fully appreciate the outsized impact that these small exchanges and interactions can have in a carceral setting.



their upcoming group visit with Álvaro, inside Ixcotel Prison. They would not normally accept such requests from academics or journalists, being skeptical of their motives and methods; but they would make an exception for me, in spite of my questionable role as an academic, on account of the engaged sort of work I was proposing, and because I would be there, foremost, as a *compa*. Once there, Erika said, I could approach Álvaro myself and let him make his own decision about whether he wished to share his story with me or not.

This particular solidarity visit, with Erika and the RvsR, was my first time inside of Ixcotel Prison—but it was not my first time standing outside of it. I had stood on the narrow street outside the gates of Ixcotel roughly a year before (October 2011), during a very different solidarity rally for the Loxicha prisoners, which was organized by a very different group of Oaxacan activists, most notably, the former prisoner, Juan Sosa Maldonado. Sosa was neither from Loxicha, nor indigenous; however, he had been persecuted and imprisoned, along with the Loxicha prisoners, as an alleged member of the EPR, in the late nineties, and released in 2001. Sosa was currently the president of the Organización de Pueblos Indígenas Zapotecos (Organization of Indigenous Zapotec Communities, OPIZ A.C.)—a new iteration, bearing little in common with its predecessor other than the name, of an organization that was founded in 1984 by Zapotec activists from Loxicha, including Álvaro Sebastián.

Over the following decade, through 1996, OPIZ emerged as a grassroots indigenous movement with broad support in the majority of San Agustín Loxicha's seventy-two communities, its subject villages<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Municipalities in Mexico still retain an internal division that originated under early Spanish colonialism, in which colonial authorities allowed local rulers and caciques in “headtowns” (*cabeceras*) to retain their authority over smaller “subject” communities and settlements (*sujetos*). These distinctions and political relations were maintained and adapted through subsequent transformations of Mexico's political geography. Rural and indigenous municipal centers thus function as administrative nodes between local populations and the larger structures of state and federal government. See Peter Gerhard, *A Guide to the Historical Geography of New Spain*, Rev. ed (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993); for central Mexico, see Charles Gibson, *The Aztecs under Spanish Rule: A History of the Indians of the Valley of Mexico, 1519-1810* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1964); for

and farmsteads,<sup>7</sup> as well as powerful enemies, largely among the economic and political “elites” (a most relative term here) based largely out of the municipal center: the town of San Agustín.<sup>8</sup> OPIZ came to play many roles in these communities—part collective bargaining agent with the state, part network of local and regional councils, part *auto-defensa*. Its initial dual focus was on organizing the poorest indigenous communities, first, to defend themselves against predatory *caciques* (local political bosses) and *pistoleros* (gangs of gunslingers) who exploited the peasants and farmers by way of usury, extortion, land-theft, and control over the local coffee economy (as middle-men) and over the municipal government; and, second, in order to collectively demand better services and infrastructure from the state through institutional channels and through acts of civil disobedience. Yet OPIZ activists wore many political hats: *Opizistas* organized local assemblies, councils, and land cooperatives; they banned the sale of alcohol in several communities—a proposal from local women concerned with alcohol’s central role in domestic violence—and they, themselves, renounced alcohol; they also hosted festive regional “Indigenous Encounters,” and organized huge marches and occupations in Oaxaca City, several hours away. This period of activism and mobilizations ended with the 1996 EPR attacks and the government persecution of the OPIZ, which government officials contended was a local foil for the EPR (which was active in several states beyond Oaxaca).

Many of the Loxicha Zapotecs who were incarcerated in the late nineties were once OPIZ activists or supporters; yet certainly not all of them: Even among the Loxicha prisoners who ultimately served the longest sentences, whom I spent time amongst in Ixcotel and Etlá, only three of them were former *Opizistas*: Álvaro, Abraham, and Zacarías. Two of the other prisoners, Agustín Luna and Fortino Enriquez,

---

Oaxaca, see Kevin Terraciano, *The Mixtecs of Colonial Oaxaca: Ñudzahui History, Sixteenth through Eighteenth Centuries* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> *Agencias municipales, Agencias de policía rural* and *rancherías*, in the political-geographical argot of Oaxaca.

<sup>8</sup> Footnote on nombres and apellidos in Mexican town names. See Rosemary Grace Beam de Azcona, “A Coatlán-Loxicha Zapotec Grammar” (University of California, Berkeley, 2004).

were rural teachers, active in the teachers union, who were on leave from teaching in 1996, having been elected in a widely attended all-community assembly, following local customs (*usos y costumbres*),<sup>9</sup> to head the municipal government of San Agustín Loxicha as municipal president (similar to the role of mayor) and head magistrate (*síndico procurador*). Their election was propelled by a massive turnout of Zapotecs from the dozens of villages and hundreds of *rancherías* in the valleys around San Agustín (the head town). After ten years of silent organizing in these communities, the OPIZ contributed to the large turnout of participants in the assembly that propelled Agustín and Fortino to the local municipal hall. Beyond the need to maintain diplomatic relations with this organization, however, the two Section 22 teachers were independent and often critical of the OPIZ.<sup>10</sup> Finally, the last two Loxicha prisoners serving longer than thirty year sentences, Eleuterio and Justino (the two who chose not be interviewed for this work) were largely indifferent and, at times, resistant towards political drama as prisoners, beyond wanting to be free. Both spoke limited Spanish and neither had political affiliations of any kind, outside of lesser *cargos* (customary community service), according to multiple other voices in interviews, nor had they traveled outside of their communities before their arrests.

These divergent political trajectories notwithstanding, all seven of these prisoners were sentenced as alleged Eperristas, on charges including terrorism; conspiracy; stockpiling weapons; illegal deprivation of freedom (distinct from kidnapping); theft; illicit use of foreign property; damage to foreign property;

---

<sup>9</sup> *Usos y Costumbres*: Spurred to act by the threat of another Zapatista uprising, such as that led by thousands of Mayan rebels in Chiapas in 1994, and by calls to action by indigenous communities and organizations in Oaxaca, in 1995, the Oaxacan legislature reformed the state constitution, further recognizing customary laws and norms, known as *Usos y Costumbres*, in Oaxaca's indigenous communities. Later that year, Agustín Luna was elected as municipal president in Loxicha.

<sup>10</sup> Their distance from OPIZ is strongly corroborated by interviews with prisoners, former *Opizistas*, and numerous residents of San Agustín Loxicha, including sympathizers and critics of OPIZ; as well as a cross-examination of the prisoner's voluminous judicial files, including legal statements/confessions, evidence, and sentences. For this dissertation, however, I have opted not to incorporate material from the criminal cases, due to their opacity, the significant impact of torture and coercion in them, and a presently, and a presently unresolvable ethical dilemma involved in their use. However, chapter 1 presents a parallel analysis, based on a historical case from the 1970s, involving a political prisoner resulting from the persecution of rural guerrillas in the neighboring state of Guerrero. The older file, aided by a memoir and a transformed archival logic, allow us to consider the archival logics and politics of a Loxicha judicial archive, which needs to remain silent for a time.

criminal association; and the two most significant charges, in terms of prison time: aggravated homicide and attempted homicide; among others.<sup>11</sup>

Juan Sosa, a Spanish-speaking *mestizo* from the valleys near Miahuatlán, spent several years in a federal prison next to several Loxicha prisoners, under similar charges. Following their release from federal prison in 2001, Sosa and a handful of former prisoners and Opizistas re-founded the OPIZ, now, as an officially accredited human rights NGO, based in Oaxaca City, to advocate for and represent the prisoners, with the agile and savvy Sosa at its helm. A decade later, however, two years before the protest he organized with the Espacio in 2011, nearly all of the prisoners (including Álvaro, a co-founder of the original OPIZ) had broken all ties with Sosa and the new OPIZ, accusing him and their long-time lawyer (who helped secure the release of hundreds of Loxicha prisoners since the late nineties) of manipulation and authoritarianism for his self-benefit. Nonetheless, Juan held onto the OPIZ monicker and to his reputation as “the representative of the Loxichas,” to the chagrin of some of the prisoners. Sosa also retained control over a shelter for relatives of the Loxicha prisoners, which the state government “donated” to OPIZ in 2001, in exchange for ending (breaking) the Loxicha women’s four-and-a-half year occupation of the Zócalo. Paradoxically, then, when I met Sosa in 2011, he continued to act as a (self-proclaimed) spokesperson, and a fervent advocate, for the Loxicha prisoners, in spite of the fact that the remaining prisoners had publicly and nearly unanimously severed ties with Sosa two years earlier.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> *Homicidio calificado*, akin to first degree murder. Several lesser charges were dropped over various appeals and re-sentencings. Notably, none of the Loxicha prisoners was charged with the crime of “rebellion.” Álvaro’s supporters in the RvsR argued that this omission was due to Article 137 of the Mexican Constitution, which states that “rebels” (defined as collectivities seeking the overthrow or transformation of the state and the creation of a new constitutional convention, including through the use of arms) cannot be accused of criminal acts of “homicide,” which are distinguished from acts of violence during acts of political rebellion. The RvsR argued that this did not imply that Álvaro *was* a rebel, but that the state was charging him with rebellion without the corresponding charges, commensurate for a “rebel.”

<sup>12</sup> The prisoners accusations against Sosa largely revolved around transparency with solidarity funds from organizations, supporters, or the state. They maintained that Sosa and others around him had benefitted from his solidarity work by receiving funds and

I had met Juan a few months earlier, while working with the *Espacio Ciudadano por la Verdad y Justicia en Oaxaca* (Citizen Space for Truth and Justice in Oaxaca; henceforth, Espacio or Espacio Ciudadano). The Espacio was a coalition of organizations—including NGO’s, the teachers union, and “victims’ organizations,” among others—designed to promote public memory work around the 2006 uprising of the Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca (Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca, APPO) in Oaxaca City in 2006. Its main goals centered around justice and an end of impunity for victims of human rights violations in 2006, primarily, through the creation of a truth commission. Sosa, presenting himself as an advocate of the Loxicha prisoners, was adamant at the meetings of the Espacio that any truth commission for Oaxaca (other TC proposals were floating around) must not limit its scope to the events of 2006, but must also address the violent atrocities and human rights violations that occurred in Loxicha, following the EPR uprising in 1996.

Thus, when the Espacio Ciudadano agreed to host the arrival of a caravan of hundreds of anti-violence protestors and victims from all over Mexico in October of 2011, Sosa insisted that the day’s events must include a protest outside of Ixcotel Prison in solidarity with the Loxicha prisoners—a point that certain members of the Espacio were equally, if more discretely, adamantly opposed to, partly due to the political toxicity of the EPR among much of the left, and an ideological discomfort for actions that could be misconstrued as supportive or forgiving of armed violence (debates which I examine in chapter 3). I had not yet decided to make the Loxicha prisoners the focus of my research, which was then focused on the 2006 APPO uprising and its legacies. However, I was vocally in support of this action as well, knowing some of the history of terror and silence surrounding the persecution of these political prisoners—yet knowing little

---

manipulating the protean solidarity movement for personal gain, rather than in the interest of their liberation. This falling out was partly a development of a surge in Zapatista activism in Oaxaca following Subcomandante Marcos’ visit to Ixcotel in 2006 and the APPO uprising. By 2009, a new Oaxacan Zapatista Collective had begun engaging the prisoners and proposing alternative forms of political struggle in and out of the prisons, including a caravan to Mexico City and a more explicitly anti-state rhetoric.

of their internal dynamics or deeply fractured history of solidarity.

Several months later, I was standing outside the gates of Ixcotel, in a crowd of hundreds of protestors, the majority of whom had arrived in Oaxaca that morning, as part of the second caravan of the Movimiento por la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad (Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity, MPJD). This six-month old movement, led by the poet Javier Sicilia (whose son was murdered earlier that year, 2011), was having a significant impact, nationally, on the debate over the Mexican government's use of military force to combat organized crime since 2006, which had generated hundreds of thousands of murders and tens of thousands of disappearances, nearly one hundred percent of which remained in impunity. The caravan consisted of dozens of buses carrying hundreds of activists and *víctimas*—victims of violence, particularly, those who had lost one or, in many cases, several family members to this tsunami of death and violence. At each stop along their route—as they had done during the first MPJD caravan through northern Mexico, a few months earlier—hundreds of *caravaneras* and *caravaneros* marched through the streets next to local organizations and supporters. Yet the key element of these rallies was the opening of a microphone and a stage for *víctimas* and relatives, local or with the caravan, to share their stories of grief and sorrow or rage, before the assembled crowds. Their goal was bring an end to this spiral of violence—but, as their name implied—an end with justice and dignity, for the living and for the dead: involving punishment for culprits, comprehensive reparations for victims, and a dignification of the dead through the recognition of their humanity, their identities and their stories (beyond “presumed criminals” or “collateral damage,” as they were generally depicted in official narratives of the drug war). All of these goals coincided with those of the Espacio Ciudadano in Oaxaca.

Sosa succeeded in organizing a contingent of local and caravan protestors to march on Ixcotel Prison. However, due to the discrete back-channeling of another Espacio member, he was unable (and livid about it) to secure the presence of the MPJD's leader, the poet Javier Sicilia, for the prison march—which

would have generated significantly more press coverage for the event—or as part of the proposed delegation of protestors that would enter the prison to relay the caravan’s message of solidarity to them directly.

Following an inaugural welcome at the pre-conquest ruins of Monte Albán and a breakout into smaller panels and forums, Sosa, led a group of protestors to the gates of Ixcotel—flanked by a silent group of five or six indigenous women, who never spoke, holding a banner reading “Freedom for Loxicha.” Speaking with these women privately later on, I learned that they lived in the OPIZ shelter and had male relatives imprisoned in Ixcotel; although they were not actually from Loxicha or associated with the case of the Loxicha prisoners.

Upon reaching the gates of Ixcotel, Sosa and his co-organizers approached the guards and demanded an audience with the prison authorities to grant them access for a delegation of protestors to meet the Loxicha prisoners, while protestors chanted “*presos políticos libertad*” and other slogans. There was precedent for this kind of action: most recently and famously, Subcomandante Marcos of the EZLN and a retinue of Zapatista supporters with The Other Campaign entered the prison in 2006, and they held a widely publicized meeting with the prisoners, at which Marcos called on Oaxaca to lead a renewed national campaign for political prisoners (along similar lines to those espoused by the RvsR, whom I would meet a year later).

On this occasion, however, the visit was not to be: After several hours of waiting on what appeared to be stalemated negotiations between organizers and prison authorities, while the protestors chanted their indignation, growing weary under the sun, finally, there came an answer: the protestors were thoroughly nonplussed when a lawyer from the teachers union appeared before the crowd and began reading aloud through a megaphone the content of a letter signed by five of the six Loxicha prisoners at Ixcotel (the seventh was at a different prison in Oaxaca). From this letter, the protestors learned that it was not the prison authorities, but the prisoners, themselves, who had stalled and, ultimately, rejected the offer of a delegation

to visit them. The letter went on to say that they (the prisoners) had not been previously consulted, or even notified, about this event; upon learning what was happening outside, the letter went on, the six prisoners held a meeting, in which they decided that any of them was free to meet with the protestors individually, however, they would not be receiving them “as Loxicha prisoners,” because they were tired of being “showcased every time that someone visits from elsewhere,” if there was no clear sense of how these projects (their own and the protestors’) fit one another.

Thus, in the end, the numbers, the clout, the press, and the brave speeches through megaphones not only failed to attain an entry to the prison for the Espacio-MPJD organizers—and a political-PR win—these things merely heightened the shared sense of frustration and embarrassment among the organizers, ending in bitter mutual accusations and cries of “sabotage” between Sosa and the leadership of the teachers union (whose lawyers represented some of the prisoners and who presented their letter), both of whom had been amongst the co-organizers of the event.

So, where this demonstration—consisting of hundreds of people and organized by seasoned Oaxacan activists, with the support of the powerful teachers union and a national movement with significant national clout (the MPJD)—had failed, I was equally stunned, a year later, to witness and be part of a different solidarity visit to the prison, which was not only successful, but diametrically distinct to the earlier one, in several respects. Unlike the previous effort, the organizers of the RvsR visit to Ixcotel practiced a form of *trabajo hormiga* (ant-work): small-scale and focused. Guided by Álvaro’s daughters and close *compas*, the 2012 event was small and silent (the press conference having taken place during the forum, a day earlier, without mention of the visit). Yet we managed to get ten people—more than the proposed delegation from a year before—past the gates and into the prison. The result was a solidarity event entirely *inside the prison*, consisting of a meeting between a political prisoner and a group of anarchists, prison



abolitionists, and Zapatista supporters, to boot.

Another significant difference between the two events was that the latter, successful, prison visit was organized in solidarity with only one of the prisoners (Álvaro, the only current adherent of The Sixth among the Loxicha prisoners), rather than with all seven of the Loxicha prisoners. At first, I was perplexed by this, yet I soon learned that the seven prisoners did not all share the same political views or preferences; nor did all of them even care to play the part of a “political” prisoner (if prisoners they had to be nonetheless).

Finally, we were inside the prison. Everyone inside desired nothing more than to get out. And here we were going the opposite direction, but with the luxury and fundamental difference that, after two or three or four hours, we would walk out of the prison the same way we came in.

After waiting in several lines and undergoing of various revision, we stepped into the prison. Others who had spent time in Ixcotel had told me what it was like inside, but I was still amazed by how vibrant with movement everything was inside. The exposed outdoor corridor, between the rampart and the inner buildings of the prison, was buzzing, almost with the air of a plaza on market day, with people—men and women—weaving baskets, selling snacks, shining shoes, eating at food stalls. Yet it remained a prison, with heavily armed guards and an oppressive atmosphere. I found the degree of movement there surprising, almost as if the inside of the prison were an extension of the urban towniness around it—from the street outside, through the wire fence atop the concrete rampart, you could just make out the water tanks, lines of wet laundry, and even a couple of plants on the roof of the dormitories, just like the ones behind us on the roofs of the modest brick and concrete houses of the *barrio*—except that everything about this place and the movements of the people inside it was stilted and suffocating. There was a feeling of “towniness” to the

place because it was inhabited by people from indigenous villages and poor barrios, people who had to keep working, even inside, sewing baskets, shining shoes, hustling—the options were limited, but poverty and the need to work did not cease at the gates. And, for all its condensed bustle, this place was essentially a miserably squalid bunker, from which its inhabitants were forbidden to leave.

We walked around the inner perimeter of the prison, past two corners, to the side facing north, in the direction of the mountains, which you could see from Álvaro's cell window, on the second floor of cell 22, "the Loxichas' cell," which the six men shared. Álvaro was standing outside the cell, beaming with pleasure. Some of the other Loxicha prisoners were there too—I recognized them from photographs I had seen in old newspapers and on the internet: Agustín Luna was weaving colorful trays out of plastic yarn and wire in the shade, nearby; and Abraham García was sewing soccer balls near the door to the cell.

The eleven of us sat in a circle on small stools, under a corrugated metal roof near the entrance to the cell, next to a three-tiered wooden altar built by the prisoners for their modest images of the Virgins of Guadalupe and Juquila, decorated with aging flowers (where had they come from?). Erika and the compas presented Álvaro with the large vinyl poster that they designed and printed for the forum—with a black silhouette of his face superimposed on a bright two-color background, in the style of recent political prisoners' campaigns in Chiapas. The compas had to argue and negotiate with the guards at the entrance in order to bring it in. Álvaro himself was speechless. Álvaro unrolled it and hung it from one side of the altar—"with the lady's permission," he joked, referring to the Virgin of Juquila.

During the meeting, Álvaro often returned to the subject of "The Sixth Declaration of the Lacandón Jungle", the EZLN's last programmatic document (2005), to which he was a proud adherent. This pleased the anarchists and Zapatista supporters among his visitors, although they seemed less keen on his frequent infusion of Catholic metaphors into his political discourse: "I read and study the principles of 'The Sixth' the same way that they used to make us learn the 'Our Father' as a child (*laughs*)." Álvaro's joy at having so

many of us there was evident. At one point, he nearly began to cry, scrunching his face, shaking his head, and making a fist in order to hold back the tears. He had only ever cried twice, he told us, which was a way of both complementing and thanking us for being there. The previous time he had cried, he said, was when a group of French activists visited him in prison, with whom he spoke “as if we were all brothers.” Later on, he allowed several of us to follow him to the second floor of cell 22, to the miniature room atop a raised platform, which he constructed himself, after taking up carpentry in prison, in order to create more room inside the cell.

Inside his tiny room was a small cot, a chair, a few items of clothing and toiletries. There were also several notebooks on a nook, with loose pages covered in handwriting that looked as if they too wanted to escape from their confines, and several books about Mexican history, penal appeals law, and the autobiography of one of the world’s most famous political prisoners, Nelson Mandela. On the wall nearest the door hung a photograph of Subcomandante Marcos standing before the statue of the schoolteacher and rural guerrilla leader in the 1960s and 1970s, Lucio Cabañas. Álvaro carefully hung his new poster from the back of the door, opposite his cot, near the other images.

Álvaro and I would meet again in this space many times over the following year. He would sit on the edge of his cot, narrating memories, anecdotes and reflections, faster than I could write, as I sat on the chair across from him, notebook pressed against one leg crossed over the other, pen racing to catch every word. Or we would walk around the open areas of the prison talking.

~\*~

## Table of Contents

Dedication.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Preface.....	viii
List of Figures.....	xxix
Glossary of Personal Names and Places.....	xxx
Glossary of Terms and Acronyms.....	xxxiii
Abstract.....	xxxv
Introduction.....	1
Part I: Voices in the Wake of Fire.....	28
Chapter 1. Speak, Documents: The Prison and the Archive.....	29
Chapter 2. From the Barricades.....	65
Chapter 3. Oaxacan Dialogues (Political <i>Quesito</i> ).....	107
Interlude: Authority in Loxicha (Prison Bird Songs).....	134
Part II: Voices in a Silent War.....	142
Prologue to Part II.....	143
Chapter 4. The Silhouettes of Silence.....	158
Chapter 5. Political Prisoners.....	197
Chapter 6. On Being Disappeared.....	247
Epilogue.....	268

Bibliography .....282

## List of Figures

Figure 1. Map of central and southern Mexico (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, INEGI).....	6
Figure 2. Topographic map of Oaxaca (INEGI).....	6
Figure 3. La Virgen de las Barrikadas (“The Virgin of the Barricades”).....	65
Figure 4. Municipal President Agustín Luna Valencia walks through the center of San Agustín Loxicha, 1996 .....	136
Figure 5. Municipal map of San Agustín Loxicha (INEGI).....	151
Figure 6. Map of southern Loxicha region (Archivo Municipal San Agustín Loxicha, undated, late 1700s) .....	163

## Glossary of Personal Names and Places

### PERSONS

**“Aureliano Chupamirto”** (born 1960s-) OPIZ activist, campesino from San Agustín Loxicha, and political prisoner in the late nineties and early 2000s. Survivor of forced disappearance and months of torture in a clandestine prison at the hands of state agents. Later became a tortilla delivery man and mototaxi driver near Oaxaca City.

**García López, Zacarías** (born 1960s-) OPIZ activist and long term political prisoner. Zapotec campesino from Loxicha. Community organizer, coordinated marches and plantones. Spent most of his sentence in ETLA prison.

**García Ramírez, Abraham** (born 1960s-) OPIZ activist and long term political prisoner. Zapotec campesino from Loxicha. Community organizer, coordinated marches and plantones. Part of the same cohort of OPIZ militants as Zacarías García, remaining friends and colleagues after their release.

**Luna Valencia, Agustín** (born 1950s-) Rural teacher and campesino from San Agustín Loxicha. Long term political prisoner. Elected as municipal president of Loxicha in 1996, and arrested later that year after leading marches to Oaxaca City.

**Sebastián Luis, Erika** (born late 1970s-) Zapotec activist from Loxicha. Adherent of the “Sixth Declaration of the Lacandón Jungle.” Member of the CNI, La Voz de los Xiches collective, and the RvsR. Daughter of Álvaro Sebastián, devoted much of her life to prisoner solidarity and indigenous rights activism. Participant in the Loxicha women’s plantón and the APPO, among others.

**Sebastián Ramírez, Álvaro** (born late 1950s-) OPIZ activist and long term political prisoner. Zapotec campesino from Loxicha. Adherent of “The Sixth Declaration of the Lacandón Jungle.” Initially a bilingual rural teacher. Co-founded OPIZ in 1984 while serving as a member of Loxicha’s municipal *cabildo*. Forced to flee along with other OPIZ figureheads in 1986 following the massacre of El Manzanal. Deeply involved in OPIZ’s emergence as a regional indigenous movement and a political force in dozens of Loxicha’s remote rural communities during the eighties and nineties. Arrested and tortured in 1998, accused by the Mexican government of participating in the EPR attacks against soldiers and police near the resort town of Huatulco in 1996. Sentenced first to 190 years; spent twenty years in prison. Free on July 7, 2017.

**Sosa Maldonado, Juan** (born 1950s-) OPIZ activist and political prisoner. Spanish speaking merchant from a campesino community near Miahuatlán. Arrested and tortured in 1998; placed in Almoloya maximum security prison; released in 2001 through Amnesty Law. Re-founded OPIZ as an accredited human rights organization: OPIZ A.C. Main representative and spokesperson for the Loxicha prisoners, 2001-2009. Participated in APPO uprising, and numerous other social movements and political spaces in Oaxaca, including Espacio Ciudadano. Survived an assassination attempt in 2014; moved to France as refugee.

## PLACES

**Etla Prison** (Villa de Etla, Oaxaca) Low-security state penitentiary located in the Valley Zapotec community of Etla, twenty kilometers northwest of Oaxaca City on the Pan-American Highway.

**Ixcotel Prison** (Santa María Ixcotel, Oaxaca) Central Penitentiary of the State of Oaxaca. A cluster of administrative offices, police garrisons, overcrowded and neglected dormitories, and constricted open spaces surrounded by high concrete walls and gates, squeezed between the urbanized town of Ixcotel and the state's secluded military grounds and army barracks, five kilometers northeast of Oaxaca's colonial center, along the Pan-American Highway. Site of incarceration for dozens of political prisoners from Loxicha from 1996-2017, for which its cell number 22 was long known as "the Loxicha cell." Common destination for many political prisoners from the repression of the APPO after 2006. Filled with poor people and indigenous people

**La Crucecita Huatulco** (Huatulco, Oaxaca) Coastal community on the Pacific Ocean, near the tourist resort town of Bahías de Huatulco, and the site of important military, naval, and police garrisons, which EPR guerrillas attacked on August 28, 1996, the most significant of simultaneous confrontations in seven different states.

**San Agustín Loxicha** (Oaxaca, Sierra Sur) Municipality and town (cabecera) in the Sierra Madre mountains of Oaxaca, between Oaxaca's Central Valleys and the Pacific Ocean, with an approximate surface area of 337 km<sup>2</sup>. Total population of municipality is 22,565; population of town, excluding subject communities, 2,266. Founded in the seventeenth century, the town of San Agustín Loxicha is the political and economic center of the "Loxichas," hundreds of predominantly Xiche Zapotec farming communities, the majority of whose population lives in small farming villages and remote farms (agencias and rancherías, population < 1,000), many of which become more remote and nearly inaccessible half of the year during the summer rainy season. Approximate distance to Mexico City 620 km; Oaxaca City 160 km; Miahuatlán 60-70 km; Pochutla 70 km; Huatulco 95 km.

**Sierra Sur** Southern mountain range of Oaxaca's bifurcated Sierra Madre corridor. Home to Zapotecs, Mixtecs, Afro-Mexicans, Huaves, Amuzgos, Mixes, and other indigenous and mestizo communities, speaking dozens of indigenous languages, as well as an equally diverse landscape of geographies and biospheres.

**Oaxaca State** (Mexico) Consistently ranked as one of the economically poorest, or the poorest, regions of Mexico, according to official census data.

**Oaxaca de Juárez** (also "Oaxaca City," population 263,357) State capital of Oaxaca, located in the Central Valleys region of the state. Provincial city, formerly known as Antequera, with distinctive green stone colonial buildings and baroque facades amid modern architecture in its historic district, surrounded by a few middle class neighborhoods and elite enclaves, amidst a wider expanse of working class neighborhoods, barrios of recently arrived migrants, and urbanizing rural towns. Its economy is significantly dependent on tourism, migrant wealth and labor, and a historically entrenched matrix of local and regional markets (physical ones) linked to the agricultural and artisanal production of towns and villages throughout the Central Valleys and the surrounding mountains. Named after Mexico's nineteenth-century indigenous president, Benito Juárez (1806-1872), who was born in the Zapotec town of Guelatao, fifty kilometers north of the city that now bears his name, in the mountain range that also bears his name today (Sierra Juárez); following the 2006 uprising, young activists re-baptized their city as "Oaxaca de Magón," after another Oaxacan-born historical figure, the anarchist journalist and



revolutionary, Ricardo Flores Magón (1874-1922).

## Glossary of Terms and Acronyms

<b>APPO</b>	Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca (Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca).
<b>barricadero/a (barrikaderx)</b>	Literally, barricader. Suffix “-x” indicates gender neutrality, reflecting common spelling.
<b>cabecera</b>	Literally, head town. Municipal center, seat of local municipal government responsible for the administration of subject communities within the municipality (sujetos).
<b>cabildo</b>	Municipal town council.
<b>CNI</b>	Congreso Nacional Indígena (National Indigenous Congress).
<b>EPR</b>	Ejército Popular Revolucionario (Popular Revolutionary Army).
<b>EZLN</b>	Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (Zapatista Army of National Liberation).
<b>OPIZ</b>	Organización de Pueblos Indígenas Zapotecos (Organization of Indigenous Zapotec Communities). Indigenous political organization founded in San Agustín Loxicha in 1984. By the early 1990s, also known as “OPIZ-Emiliano Zapata” (OPIZ-EZ). Re-founded as an accredited non-profit organization ( <i>asociación civil</i> ), “OPIZ A.C.,” in Oaxaca City in 2001.
<b>plantón</b>	The indefinite occupation of public spaces, such as plazas, streets or buildings, by an organized group of protestors; typically, an indefinite occupation intended to disrupt the ordinary flow of life, accompanied by a list of demands or negotiation points directed at government officials or other power holders. Literally, the effect of “planting” oneself in place, i.e., a plant-in.
<b>PROCUP-PDLP</b>	Partido Revolucionario Obrero Campesino Unión del Pueblo–Partido de los Pobres (Union of the People Revolutionary Worker Peasant Party–Party of the Poor).
<b>pueblo</b>	A highly polysemic word; in various contexts translates as “community,” “town,” “a people,” “the people,” among others.
<b>RvsR</b>	Red Contra la Represión y por la Solidaridad (Network Against Repression and for Solidarity). A political prisoner solidarity and anti-repression collective, part of the broader network of Zapatista supporters and adherents to the Sixth.
<b>Sixth, The</b>	Sexta Declaración de la Selva Lacandona (“Sixth Declaration of the Lacandón Jungle”). Published by the EZLN in 2005, the last of the Zapatista “declarations.” A manifesto (and literary feat) explaining the basic tenets of Zapatista principles and history, as well as their vision for Mexico and the

world and political action “below and to the left.” Basis for a national and international network of “adherents” committed to its vision of local autonomy, collective dignity, and anti-state and anti-capitalist organizing.

**VOCAL**

Voces Oaxaqueñas Construyendo Autonomía y Libertad (Oaxacan Voices Constructing Autonomy and Liberty). Youth collective formed by barrikaderxs, libertarixs, Zapatista supporters, and others after the second APPO congress in 2007. Influential voice in Oaxaca’s post-APPO left. Established CASOTA, an autonomist squat-inspired house with a library and popular kitchen in 2009. Declined after subsequent eviction.

**Voz de los Xiches**

Colectivo La Voz de los Zapotecos Xiches en Prisión (The Voice of the Xiche Zapotecs in Prison Collective).

**Xiche**

Ethnonym: Zapotecs from Loxicha; speakers of Coatlán-Loxicha Zapotec.

## Abstract

This dissertation is about social movements and the politics of historical memory surrounding popular uprisings and state terror in Oaxaca, Mexico, from roughly the 1970s to the 2010s. Based on approximately thirty-two months of ethnographic fieldwork and historical research conducted between 2008 and 2017 in Oaxaca City, San Agustín Loxicha, and two Oaxacan prisons (Ixcotel and Etna state penitentiaries), this dissertation sheds light on the relationship among experiences of political violence and upheaval, public and personal expressions of memory, and the everyday practices of activists and social movements in Oaxaca. It specifically focuses on two cases of rebellion and repression in Oaxaca—the rural guerrilla insurgency of the Popular Revolutionary Army (Ejército Popular Revolucionario, EPR) in 1996 and the urban uprising of the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca, APPO) in 2006. This dissertation offers an ethnographically grounded perspective on political prisoners’ resistance to state terror and corruption, as well as their experiences of torture and silencing through an examination of how ongoing social movements have grappled with the historical origins, outcomes, and legacies of these events. In doing so, it presents prisoners as individuals whose stories of violence, suffering, and disappearance reveal not just the brutal repression they experienced at the hands of the Mexican state for holding opposing/threatening views, but also the urgent need to take steps towards truth and reconciliation. Additionally, such stories also raise critical questions about the ethical relationship between scholars and their subjects, which the dissertation addresses by building on the engaged researcher framework.

I approach the dual themes of historical memory and silence as conceptual bridges through which to trace the connections among these different periods of political upheaval: namely, indigenous political organizing and rural armed conflict between the 1970s and 1990s, the urban uprising of 2006, and the struggles of Zapotec political prisoners, radical urban youths, and truth commission activists in the 2010s. In writing about post-conflict memory and social movements in Oaxaca, my objectives are twofold: first, to participate in and analyze collaborative processes of recovering and reconstructing new histories of resistance and repression; and, second, to trace the ways in which Oaxacans themselves have made sense of

these histories and experiences of violence through personal and public constructions of memory, including intimate and public acts of oral testimony. Drawing on anthropological and historical methods, the thesis brings together a range of theoretical approaches, including engaged anthropology, social movement studies, the politics of memory and silence, and self-reflexive ethnography.

-\*-

## Introduction

This dissertation is about social movements and historical memory in the aftermath of political uprisings in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico, from roughly the 1980s to the 2010s. It examines “memory and justice” projects in Oaxaca in the aftermaths of two violent political upheavals in Oaxaca in 1996 and 2006, respectively: the uprising of the Ejército Popular Revolucionario (Popular Revolutionary Army, EPR), and the repercussions of state and paramilitary violence in the indigenous communities and social movements of San Agustín Loxicha, Oaxaca; and the popular uprising, one decade later, of the Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca (Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca, APPO) in Oaxaca City.

I seek to illuminate the relationship among experiences of political upheaval and violence, personal and public memories of these events, and the everyday practices of social movements and activists in Oaxaca. My main concern, in other words, is to understand the relationship between the role of historical memory in political processes, such as those that led to Álvaro Sebastián Ramírez’s incarceration and those that derived from it, and the role of memory in the everyday lives of people such as Álvaro, or the personal choices and conflicts among his children and other young Oaxacan activists (though not exclusively), many of whom lived through and remember the violence of 1996 and then participated in the uprising of 2006.

This thesis draws on my work as an engaged historical anthropologist in Mexico and my collaborations and participation in different political projects in Oaxaca that posited the recovery or reconstruction of historical memory as a central part of their broader pursuit and construction of social

justice. It also draws significantly on oral testimonies, the significance of which I discuss further below.

In writing about post-conflict memory and social movements in Oaxaca, my objectives are twofold: first, to participate in larger collaborative processes of recovering and reconstructing new histories of resistance and repression; and, second, to trace the ways in which Oaxacans themselves have made sense of these histories and experiences of violence, their personal memories, public forms of memory—such as truth commissions or public acts of oral testimony—as well as their ongoing struggles and visions for the future.

I approach historical memory as a conceptual bridge through which to trace the connections between very different periods of political upheaval: namely, the armed insurgency of 1996, the popular uprising of 2006, and the ongoing efforts to grapple with both of their legacies, through the 2010s. This, then, is not a complete social history of social movements in Oaxaca—neither of the APPO rebellion, nor of the EPR, nor of decades of political organizing among Zapotecs from San Agustín Loxicha. Rather, it is about the historical memory of these events; it is about the presence of these pasts and the political struggles surrounding their meanings and their role in everyday life.

By “the politics of historical memory”—particularly, as it relates to the work of social movements and activists<sup>13</sup> in Mexico—I am referring to a broad repertoire of efforts to amplify marginalized and silenced voices, to exhume new histories (often, literally, as in the exhumation of thousands of mass clandestine graves filled throughout Mexico in the 2010s), or reanimate old ones, and their role in ongoing political struggles and identity formation. Perhaps most importantly, I am also referring to the conflicts that then emerge over the specific contents and contours that these histories should assume (the devil is in the

---

<sup>13</sup> Historical memory is, of course, not under the sole purview of social movements; states and corporations, among many others, may also participate in political debates over the meanings of history and its legacies. Throughout this thesis, however, I am particularly concerned with historical memory work as it pertains to the work of social movements and activists.

details, after all) and over what role these emergent histories and voices should play in the broader political landscapes and everyday lives of Mexicans, their kitchen tables, so to speak. Such debates can become heated, and they can also take starkly material and economic forms, for instance, in disputes amongst victims of state violence during 2006 over whether to accept reparations (including monetary ones) from the state, and whether that meant forgoing further demands and actions for redress (see chapter 3).

We cannot speak about the politics of memory, however, without considering its ever present complement, its underside and antipode—the politics of silence—and the interplay between the two. It would be impossible to see anything at all under total light, as shadows are part of what reveals the contours of that which is illuminated. Similarly, in total sound and the absence of silence, we would hear everything and, therefore, nothing. Silence is indispensable for sound to take the form of words, or songs, or stories. In filling the spaces between and around words, and songs and stories, it is silence that defines their contours. It is their frame. It is through this dialectical play of voice and silence, light and shadow, that the things we see and hear acquire *form* and meaning, thus becoming communicable and intelligible.

The politics of silence can take many forms. For Aureliano, a one-time Loxicha prisoner (whose life story is the subject of chapter 5), was forcibly disappeared by Mexican armed forces and placed inside a clandestine prison where he was routinely tortured for the better part of a year, one of the most searing memories that still haunt him, physically as well as emotionally, is that of music. His captors would blare music, for days on end, without stopping for a moment. And they would never turn off the lights. Handcuffed to a cot in a cell underground, there was no way to avoid the deafening sounds, the blinding lights that never ceased.

During those nine months of being disappeared, interrogated and repeatedly tortured (as in an actual hell from which there is no escape to the repetition), dehumanized and disfigured, having lost even the power to take his own life in order to end his torment—the only power that Aureliano retained was his



silence. Eventually, even that was broken, because everything has its limit.

Yet for seven months, he recalls, he never spoke a word, at least, not of what they wanted to hear. His only possession in that nightmare situation of bare life were his words, the sounds by which he could give form to his memories: that which he could relate, and for which his military persecutors were willing to dehumanize and disfigure him. His memories, his words, and the power of his silence were everything that he possessed; all else was bare life. Even while explaining this to me, years later, during our many conversations and interviews, the depths of his traumatic struggle between voice and silence would reveal themselves and structure our interactions in ways that neither of us expected. Sometimes it was hard for him to speak, or he would struggle over what to reveal to me. Other times, his words were like a dam becoming a river, inundating dry causeways and giving them new life and new contours with sweeping force.

Within the dual themes of memory and silence, a major motif running through this dissertation is how these play out in the relationship between domination and resistance, as in the disquieting silence that still prevailed in San Agustín Loxicha at the time I lived there, around its inhabitants' living memories of recent political mobilizations since the 1980s and 1990s. This is the silence left behind by crushing military occupation and paramilitary reaction that affected thousands of already vulnerable and marginalized Zapotecs, on the back of previous decades of silent local armed conflict over municipal power, exploitation, and land. Pushing back against silence were the women who occupied the Zócalo in Oaxaca City for four years, making their physical presence on the plaza a constant reminder of that which the state governor—whose offices were within ear's range, just above their encampment in the arcade—was eager to silence and forget. Analogous stories would later unfold in the aftermath of the APPO rebellion that erupted in 2006, which erupted on that same plaza, after another PRI governor attempted to violently evict a different encampment of protestors.

The politics of memory and silence, in other words, often refer to state and paramilitary violence

and impunity, as well as to resistance and reaction against these from below, as in social movements' efforts to expose and mitigate such forms of silence from above and to redress the deep marks left behind by violence, often by reclaiming and amplifying that which was silenced by force. However, as the preceding anecdotes about Aureliano and Loxicha reveal, silence can also be a "weapon of the weak".<sup>14</sup> Thus, in this dialectic of memory and silence, we also find smaller motifs, such as the intentional or strategic uses of silence from below. Other examples of this leitmotif include the growth in silence and shadows of the OPIZ indigenous movement in Loxicha in the 1980s; contests within social movements, such as the Espacio Ciudadano, over which silenced histories fit or get excluded from historical memory work; or the studied silence of current prisoners in discussing certain aspects of their personal and collective struggles and histories; or the near taboo, within the broader left, surrounding the stigmatized EPR guerrilla, any open or imputed association with which could place one in great danger.<sup>15</sup>

Confronted with the strategic and intentional uses of silence, I was often forced, in my role as anthropologist-historian, to grapple with the limits and boundaries of "truth and memory" regarding my research around the aftermath of 2006, and, particularly, around the legacies of 1996 in Loxicha. It also often generated disputes and disagreements within social movements committed to memory work. Thus, this dissertation is shaped by such contentions and fraught silences as it is by the articulated politics and vocalized stories of Oaxaca's social movements.

---

<sup>14</sup> Scott James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

<sup>15</sup> Two avowed EPR militants, Edmundo Reyes Anaya and Gabriel Alberto Cruz Sánchez, were disappeared in Oaxaca City as late as 2007, leading to stalemated attempts at negotiations between the clandestine party and the Mexican state, despite the efforts of a Mediation Commission (COMED). See Pablo Romo Cedano and Yaiza Ariana Rodríguez, eds., *Desapariciones forzadas en México: documentos del proceso de la Comisión de Mediación, el PDPR-EPR y el Gobierno Federal* (México, D.F.: Ediciones SeraPaz, 2010).



Figure 1. Map of central and southern Mexico (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, INEGI)

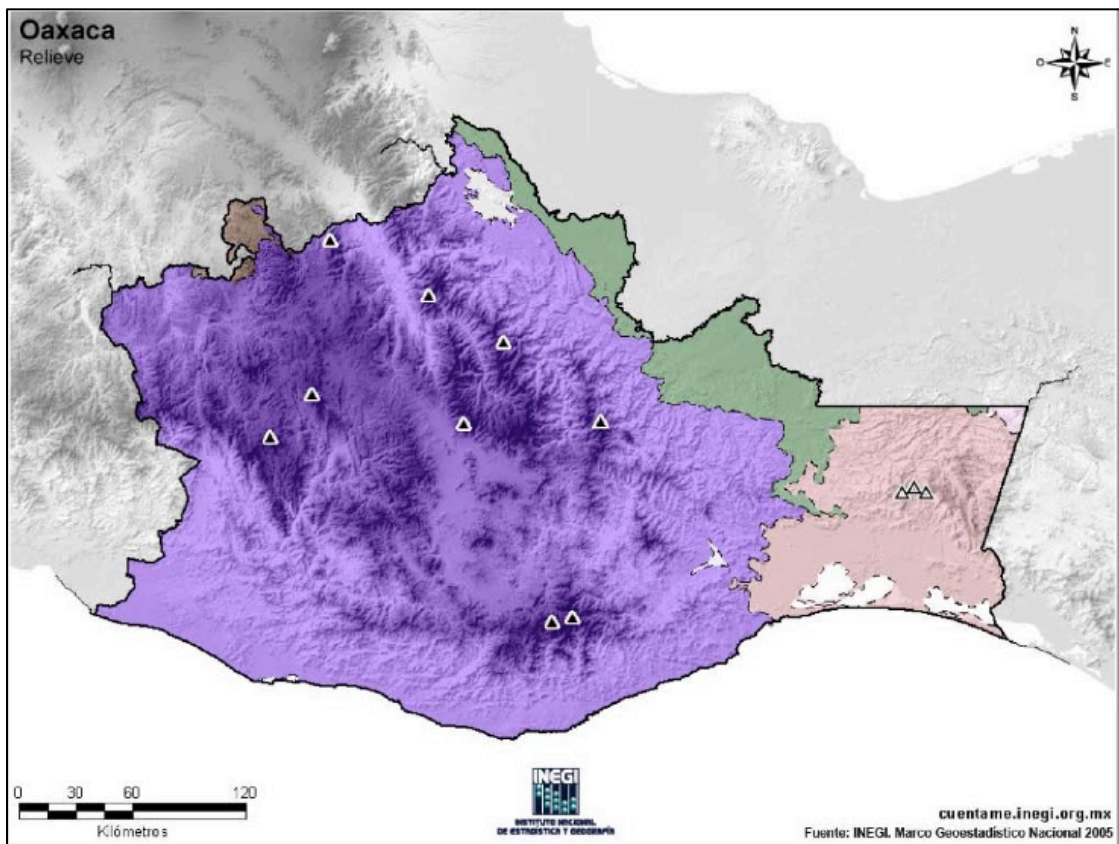


Figure 2. Topographic map of Oaxaca (INEGI)

## A Fieldwork Story

In addition to narrating the stories and experiences of Oaxacan activists, the following chapters follow my own journey as an ethnographer-historian, professional *metiche* (busybody), and participant in Oaxaca's infamous *quesillo político* (Oaxaca-string-cheese politics)—from my first days on the occupied Zócalo, where I met my first teachers and co-ethnographers, the *libertarios*, punks, and other radical youths of the (post-) 2006 movement, to my participation in the truth commission and memory work of the Espacio Ciudadano, and, finally, my research in San Agustín Loxicha and oral history work with the Loxicha political prisoners in Ixoctel and Etna prisons, whose first months of freedom we discuss in the epilogue.

When I began visiting Oaxaca in the summer of 2008, the first thing I did the day that I arrived was walk to the occupied Zócalo, where several thousand striking teachers from Section 22 of the dissident Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación (National Coordinating Committee of Education Workers, CNTE) had transformed Oaxaca City's main plaza into a carnivalesque tent city that looked like a sea of blue, green, and gray plastic tarps and tents. Joining them were several other sympathetic smaller organizations and collectives, spread throughout the broad plaza, the atrium of the cathedral, and several of the surrounding streets. What I was witnessing was, in a sense, the latest iteration of a ritual of rebellion that had taken place every year around the month of May, since Section 22 teachers took the plaza in 1980 [1981?] to demand more wages and more rights, but also a broad list of social demands [examples]. The *plantón* (occupation) that I stepped into twenty-eight years later, however, was not merely the teachers' plantón any longer: it was the plantón of the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca, the gargantuan coalition of organizations that had erected hundreds of neighborhood barricades and taken over radio and television stations two years earlier. By 2008, the APPO was, for all practical purposes, a shadow of what it had been before the entrance of federal police and marines in November 2006. Yet the material traces of its memory loomed from the occupied Zócalo, present in the enormous banners, in the graffiti, in the litany of

speeches, the pamphlets and leaflets strewn all around, on the television sets of street vendors pedaling DVD documentaries about 2006, and even in casual conversations over *esquites*.

I originally went to Oaxaca with the (admittedly vague) intention of studying how activists in the state's diverse panoply of social movements were performing "rituals of rebellion" and<sup>16</sup> how these emerged from the confluence of personal experiences, local histories of resistance, and national, regional and global "languages of power,"<sup>17</sup> or counter-power, from the cultural legacy of the Mexican Revolution to neo-Zapatismo. My main concrete design, however, was to walk right to the middle of the occupied Zócalo and start talking to the rebel teachers—and start listening, if they'd let me. This design worked out to the extent that I got to the Zócalo and initiated a few awkward and brief interactions with a handful of teachers, as I made my way through the maze of ropes and tents in the promenades and different sections of the plantón, until finally I walked up to the gazebo, and climbed its steps onto the raised navel of the plaza. The first thing I noticed was that the gazebo was occupied not by teachers, but by a motley assortment of youths with a distinctly more alternative, urban, and edgy aesthetic: in their clothes, their hairstyles, their banners, or the radical hip hop blasting from an old speaker, drowning out the 1970s revolutionary folk music emitting from the teachers' sound system below. The second thing I noticed was that the gazebo felt like the crow's nest of the plantón: from here, the view was expansive over the sea of tarps flooding the open spaces, past the cathedral, all the way to the colonial facades of the banks on Independencia Street and the "Benito Juárez" Autonomous University of Oaxaca law school and a bank across Independencia Street—shrouded, as they were, with giant banners of lewd hand-painted caricatures of Ulises Ruiz, the governor that the APPO sought to dethrone, Mexican president, Felipe Calderón, and Elba Esther Gordillo, the president of

---

<sup>16</sup> See William H. Beezley, Cheryl English Martin, and William E. French, eds., *Rituals of Rule, Rituals of Resistance: Public Celebrations and Popular Culture in Mexico*, Latin American Silhouettes (Wilmington, Del: SR Books, 1994); Mary K. Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution: Teachers, Peasants, and Schools in Mexico, 1930-1940* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997).

<sup>17</sup> On languages of power see Harry G. West, *Kupilikula: Governance and the Invisible Realm in Mozambique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

the official national teachers union, the Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación (National Union of Education Workers, SNTE).

As I contemplated the view (trying hard to look cool and inconspicuous), it was only a few moments before I'd struck up a conversation with a young man around my age, who asked what I was up to. I told him I was there to join the plantón and to write about the APPO from a position of critical solidarity. "Welcome to the insurgency," he replied, with a grin. And that was how I started hanging out with the *libertarios* and the *barricaderas* of the plantón—anarchist-leaning young women and men, many of whom met and forged many of their current aspirations in the barricades in 2006. From the gazebo and the relationships that I formed there, I was then able to meet and interact with many other people and groups in the movement.

### *Ethnographic Designs and Accidents*

Ethnography and historical encounters are driven as much by design as they are by accidents. Both entail taking journeys that require learning how to inhabit and move through new social environments (where these be archives or prisons). Taking unexpected turns in unforeseen directions, intentionally, is an inherent part of these pursuits. Thus, I went to Oaxaca to interview striking teachers about their resistance; yet I ended up immersed in the post-APPO movement, instead, alongside the movement's misfits: the rowdy youths of the movement who were there in solidarity with the teachers, yet regularly disobeyed the top-down directions of the teachers' union, often siding with dissident blocs within the union. These misfits, the punks and anarchists and other young activists of the movement became my first teachers in "the field," on the occupied Zócalo, and occupied schools and kitchen tables where they led me, and they became the initial protagonists of my early writing around memory and social movements.

Depending whom one asked, the radical youths—many, though not all, of whom leaned politically anarchist(-ic)—were in, some sense, the gadflies of the movement. This was partly due to their complex relationship to violence: their overt embrace of direct action, like smashing windows or confronting police during marches, or their radical discourses and aesthetics (although they were not alone or unique in either of these aspects). Moreover, a lot of the media coverage of the post-APPO movement, as well as critics within and without the movement often fixated on and sensationalized depictions of hooded youths engaged in senseless acts of destruction. The more conservative elements of the massive teachers' union would often pigeon-hole young protestors this way. It is worth noting, however, that both the teachers' union and the APPO movement, at large, both occupied similarly fraught and ambiguous positions with relation to direct action and to critical (usually sensationalized) critiques of violence. In this way, the broader movement's fraught relationship to condemnatory critiques of violence was recursively reflected inwards, towards the often maligned radical youths of the movement, where these debates and tensions became most amplified and pointed. Later, while participating in truth-and-justice work through civil society organizations, it would again be the minor-key stories, the uncomfortable or awkward pieces of the story that I ended up focusing on.

As I began spending time with young activists on the occupied plaza, I became interested in the ways in which these groups were generating alternative contestatory histories of the APPO, recasting it as genealogy and origins, but also as aspirational models for future politics. There was a longing to return to 2006 in order to move forward, to rekindle the insurgency. By 2008, the performative dimensions of memory—invocations and simulations of the insurgency—were a central part of their various overlapping political projects.

In addition to the performative memory around the 2006 uprising, I was also captivated by the broader forms of historical memory work that the movements on the plaza were developing. The anarchist-

leaning radical youths and street artists whom I was spending time with, for instance, were turning their attention to other radical and marginalized histories and figures in Oaxacan and Mexican history. At a time when the exhumations of clandestine graves was becoming a rising concern throughout Mexico (graves of leftist radicals in the seventies, and the new explosion of graves from the drug war), these youth organizations were graphically and discursively exhuming and giving new life to lesser-known radical figures, such as Lucio Cabañas, a schoolteacher who became the leader of a rural guerrilla army in the neighboring state of Guerrero in the late sixties and early seventies, or Ricardo Flores Magón, the Oaxacan-born anarchist intellectual whose trans-national revolutionary movement was influential during the Mexican Revolution of 1910.

They were looking to the past, but these young activists were also looking to the sides, and they were concerned with raising the voices of other marginalized or silenced struggles around them, and with building effective bridges of solidarity towards these struggles. Young anarchist-leaning activists (although they were not alone in this) argued that social movements in Oaxaca, and beyond, could not honestly claim to pursue social justice or emancipation if they did not fight for those left behind—their prisoners and their disappeared—and place these at the center of their struggles. Organizations, including the teachers' union and various others, had long embraced the demand of freedom for prisoners and finding those who were disappeared; however, these young activists, newly radicalized in 2006, sought to bring new forms and new life to their solidarity with old cases of indigenous political prisoners, such as those from San Agustín Loxicha or from Santiago Xanica, both in the south of Oaxaca.

As I undertook new fieldwork in the summers of 2009 and 2010, I shifted from a narrow focus on the history of the APPO and its living memory in the post-APPO movements such as the anarchist youth collectives, to the histories and memories that *they* were calling on activists and researchers to focus on.



Thus, in the summer of 2009, I decided to use my training as a historian to trace the origins of one of the Oaxacan left's favorite underground icons, the guerrilla teacher Lucio Cabañas, whose image I first encountered on stencils in the streets of Oaxaca. Therefore, I spent several weeks conducting fieldwork in Atoyac de Álvarez, in the neighboring state of Guerrero, where I interviewed activists and former militants about the history of guerrilla movements and state repression in the 1970s, as well as the memory work that was taking place around them in the early 2000s. I then spent several weeks tracing these events in the National Archive in Mexico City in the recently disclosed secret police archives. At this time, following the first historical defeat of the PRI for the presidency in 2000, there was enthusiasm and hope that a truth commission, or something analogous to it, could utilize these newly available archival sources in their work. A special commission (FEMOSPP, see chapter 1) did produce a historical report based on these materials and on new testimonies, but it was given no juridical power.

Focusing on the politics of memory in the aftermath of the APPO rebellion thus led me to consider older stories of insurgency and violence, such as the case of Loxicha and its political prisoners—a case that rocked Oaxaca in the late 1990s yet remained unresolved and half-forgotten fifteen years later: long term prisoners remained, and impunity and silence prevailed. I therefore shifted my focus, from the most talked about and controversial recent uprising, the APPO, and its aftermath, to a case with many parallels and similarities, but that had flared more than a decade before and subsided, with occasional bursts of renewed political effervescence and public attention in subsequent years. Yet, even as elements of the post-APPO movement organized to create “truth and justice” around the recent history of 2006, they often struggled and occasionally faltered in trying to grapple with the fraught legacies and tangled allegiances around older living histories of rebellion, state violence, and impunity, such as the Loxicha case—at times casting light on these and, at other times, occluding them.

Tracing the history of the Party of the Poor and Lucio Cabañas, in the recently declassified secret

police archives in Mexico City and in oral histories in Guerrero, led me to further investigate the topics of counterinsurgency and state terror. I discovered significant parallels between events that took place in Guerrero during the 1970s, in the wake of the *Cabañista* rebellion, and what happened two decades later in the aftermath of rural rebellions in Oaxaca and Chiapas, in the mid-1990s. The connections between the first chapter and the history of guerrillas in the state of Guerrero and prisoners in Mexico City forms a pair of bookends with the final chapter, linking rural insurgency and state terror in the 1970s with events in the 1990s. Chapter 1 examines these issues through the written testimony of a former political prisoner and victim of disappearance in the 1970s, while chapter 6 focuses a similar case of forced disappearance, torture, and prison, but through the oral testimony of a former Loxicha prisoner (“Aureliano”), whom I interviewed several times over the course of several years. Thus, the first and last chapter both focus closely on the experiences of individual subjects and voices, through different forms of testimony—from legal statements to memoir to oral history. Both of these subjects were victims of forced disappearance and torture by the Mexican state in the 1970s and 1990s, respectively; and their experiences as *desaparecidos* and then political prisoners are remarkably similar. Both were subsequently released from clandestine military prisons—that is, they were “re-appeared”—and immediately flung into the role of political prisoners for several more years.

## **Conceptual Approach**

This dissertation is based on my work as an engaged historical anthropologist in Oaxaca. Throughout the different cases and events that they consider, I attempt to grapple with the challenge set forth by Kirsch for “engaged anthropologists to be more forthcoming” in how they address the dilemmas and challenges that take place in the “backstage” of research projects. I do so by drawing on the lessons of the writing culture movement in anthropology in the 1980s, by being more reflexive in our writing around the

“challenges, complications, and contradictions of engaged anthropology.” This means being reflexive about the politics of engaged projects “beyond the text,” particularly in the context of fieldwork and the complex relationships and alignments that constitute ethnography.<sup>18</sup>

I became an engaged historical anthropologist by design, rather than by accident (cf. Kirsch 2018): That is to say, I became an anthropologist specifically with the intention and the hope of using the rich tools of anthropology in the interests of social justice in my native Mexico, with the hope of pushing anthropology’s special capacity for “cultural critique” and taking it to its radical conclusions, by practicing (an always incomplete attempt at) a de-colonizing methodology.<sup>19</sup> This is not a prescription; I do not claim that all anthropology needs be engaged.<sup>20</sup> Yet, for me, these were there from the beginning: Prior to any research hypotheses or detached theoretical frameworks,<sup>21</sup> a politically engaged orientation has guided my approach to fieldwork (and to theory). This orientation privileges what Kirsch refers to as the “politics beyond the text[s]” of anthropology—particularly, the politics and praxis of fieldwork, with all of its complexities (and vulnerability and failures), implicit in any attempt to form and maintain the webs of relations needed to carry out any form of ethnographic engagement, not to mention those needed to inhabit multiple (if overlapping) communities and social realities.

---

<sup>18</sup> Stuart Kirsch, *Engaged Anthropology: Politics beyond the Text* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2018), 4, 21–22.

<sup>19</sup> On cultural critique in anthropology see Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005). On the distinction between activist research and cultural critique, see Charles R. Hale, “Activist Research v. Cultural Critique: Indigenous Land Rights and the Contradictions of Politically Engaged Anthropology,” *Cultural Anthropology* 21, no. 1 (2006): 96–120, <https://doi.org/10.1525/can.2006.21.1.96>; Shannon Speed, *Rights in Rebellion: Indigenous Struggle and Human Rights in Chiapas* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2008).

<sup>20</sup> As Kirsch points out, certain forms of anthropological research are better off remaining dis-engaged. That said, anthropologists should be, if not politically, then at least ethically engaged. Regardless of whether they identify as “political” or not, the work that anthropologists do has real repercussions on the people they study, and the relationship between anthropologists and informants are often based on vastly unequal power relations. I do not hold politically engaged forms of ethnography as a prescription for anthropologists. However, it is worth noting that different strands of engaged or radical forms of anthropology have provided valuable responses to the historical critique of the discipline’s colonial legacies.

<sup>21</sup> Granted, an engaged methodology is not divorced from the theoretical and intellectual orientations we learn in graduate school, or anywhere else, as these are always in a dialogical relationship.

### *Virtues and Contradictions of Engaged Research*

Practicing different forms of engaged research, which I discuss in the following chapters, has enabled me to examine how different social movements work and think by experiencing them from the inside. While conducting the fieldwork for my dissertation, presenting myself as an *antropólogo comprometido* or *solidario* enabled me to inhabit spaces that a more apolitical, or even a less overtly political and sympathetic, researcher would have difficulty gaining access to. Engaged research also raises its own set of challenges, including many that are specific to particular political engagements and projects. For instance, in Oaxaca City, my work with anarchist(-ic) youth collectives or organizations of victims seeking redress for state violence in Oaxaca, was at times interrupted because these groups ceased to exist or met an impasse in their work.

### *Archive and Repertoire*

In my own work for this thesis, I follow Stephen's focus on the broader implications of testimony and what she calls "the testimonial archive and . . . testimonial performance," as well as her methodological approach to truth commissions, which "centers on the testifier as an active social agent in a personal and collective performative act that can potentially broaden the meaning of truth to advance alternative and contested understandings of history."<sup>22</sup> As Stephen notes, various forms of oral testimony and storytelling played a crucial role in the 2006 uprising. Stephen argues that the APPO movement "relied heavily on oral testimony, which was heard in marches and rallies, in grassroots video productions, on the state and commercial radio and TV stations that were taken over by the movement, and in nightly conversations at the

---

<sup>22</sup> Lynn Stephen, *We Are the Face of Oaxaca: Testimony and Social Movements* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 4-6.

hundreds of neighborhood barricades constructed throughout the city.”<sup>23</sup>

Writing about the political struggles surrounding the discovery of police archives documenting human rights abuses during the dictatorship in Guatemala, Kirsten Weld proposes “bringing a historian’s eye to bear upon how postwar activists use historical research and archives precisely as a way of marching in the streets today.”<sup>24</sup> Such an approach involves examining the history *in* the archive, as well as the history *of* the archive.<sup>25</sup> Weld argues that “we must place archives—with their histories, their contingencies, their silences and gaps, and their politics—at the heart of our research questions rather than simply relegating them to footnotes and parentheses.”<sup>26</sup> As Weld’s work illustrates, archives are significant not only as “a method of historical analysis,” but also as “a frame for political analysis.” On the other hand, anthropological or historical treatments of oral testimony and memory often focus on these solely as “frames for political analysis,” underplaying their value as methods of historical analysis.

### **Social Movements, Truth Commissions, and Oral Testimony**

In the years following 2006, many organizations and collectives that had supported or participated in the APPO also began calling for the creation of a truth commission to investigate the events of 2006. In addition to investigating these events, a truth commission would theoretically also lead to some form of

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Similarly, in writing about the political struggles surrounding the emergence and politicization of police archives during the dictatorship in Guatemala, Kirsten Weld proposes “bringing a historian’s eye to bear upon how postwar activists use historical research and archives precisely as a way of marching in the streets today.” While I acknowledge the many limitations and problems that arise in any comparison between archives and “memory;” nonetheless, I find this approach useful in thinking about my own methodological approach to various forms of historical memory. Particularly, I appreciate her dual approach to historical archives and what she calls “archival thinking,” which involves approaching archives simultaneously as “a method of historical analysis,” but also as “a frame for political analysis”—that is, examining the history in the archive, as well as the history of the archive. Kirsten Weld, *Paper Cadavers: The Archives of Dictatorship in Guatemala*, American Encounters/Global Interactions (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 4, 12, 19.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>26</sup> While acknowledging the limitations and problems in any comparison between archives and “memory;” I find elements of Weld’s approach to archives useful in thinking about my own methodological approach to repertoires of historical memory.

accountability for the perpetrators of violence and to some form of reparations for scores of victims. During my fieldwork in 2011 and 2012, I participated in the truth commission campaign and public memory work of the Espacio Ciudadano por la Verdad y Justicia en Oaxaca (Citizen Space for Truth and Justice in Oaxaca, “Espacio Ciudadano”), a coalition of about a dozen organizations that came together in 2011 around issues of “truth and justice,” violence, and public memory in the aftermath of the 2006 uprising. I began working as the on-site ethnographer-historian being given the charge of *documentación*, to create a testimonial archive for the Espacio, which could benefit the work of a future truth commission.

Unfortunately, this project never came to fruition, as the Espacio coalition imploded due to an internal conflict between members of two *organizaciones de víctimas*, that is, two organizations of victims of state violence in 2006, over the question of monetary reparations from the state government under the recently elected Gabino Cue, the first non-PRI governor in Oaxaca. Previously, the Espacio Ciudadano had already grappled and publicly stumbled over internal disagreements, relating partly to a debate over what the appropriate historical scope of the truth commission should be—namely, whether it should focus exclusively on the events of 2006 or also consider older cases of human rights violations and state violence against social movements, such as the case of the indigenous political prisoners of San Agustín Loxicha, a Zapotec peasant community near the coast of Oaxaca where the government arrested and imprisoned hundreds of Zapotecs in the late 1990s for allegedly participating in the rural guerrilla insurgency of the Ejército Popular Revolucionario (Popular Revolutionary Army, EPR), while dozens of others were killed or disappeared under a military and paramilitary occupation that continued to the present.

This debate within the Espacio Ciudadano erupted into public space when certain members of the Espacio attempted to organize a march to Ixcotel Prison on the outskirts of Oaxaca City, where six of the last Loxicha prisoners were serving thirty-year sentences. The organizers of this event (whom I discuss in the preface) wanted to use the arrival of hundreds of protestors from other parts of Mexico, who were traversing

the country on a caravan of dozens of buses, in order to denounce the crisis of violence and impunity that was overwhelming Mexico under the drug war. At each stop along the way, the caravan held acts of political solidarity for victims of violence, which heavily featured acts of testimony in the form of open mics for the people (women, in the majority) who had lost a loved one or had someone who was “disappeared.”

The most ardent proponent of broadening the scope of a prospective truth commission’s work to consider 1996 and the Loxicha case was Juan Sosa, the Espacio Ciudadano member and head of the new OPIZ (see preface; chapter 3). The controversial and spurned prisoner advocate, hoped to lead a march of protestors during the peace caravan’s visit to the gates of Ixcotel Prison, which would end with a delegation of protestors, led by him, entering the prison and delivering a public message of solidarity to the Loxicha prisoners. Hundreds of protestors did end up marching to Ixcotel. However, the public face of the Movimiento por la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad (Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity), the poet and political analyst, Javier Sicilia, was notably missing, having been diverted by another member of the Espacio Ciudadano, no less, who was opposed to incorporating the Loxicha case into the purview of the Espacio, both historically and politically. Ultimately, however, the protest at the prison failed, humiliatingly for its organizers, because the prisoners themselves rebuffed the hundreds of visitors outside in a public letter stating that they knew nothing about this event, nor had they been notified or consulted about it, and that they were tired of being used as political tokens for the catharsis of others. Hundreds of protestors stood wondering what they had just witnessed.

Nine different national truth commissions have functioned in Latin America since 1982: in Bolivia (1982), Argentina (1983), Chile (1990), Ecuador (1996), El Salvador (1992), Guatemala (1994), Peru (2000), Uruguay (2000), and Brazil (2017). In Mexico, a state-level truth commission in the state of Oaxaca published its findings in 2014, although it failed to generate any further results in terms of transformative justice, reparations for victims, or processes of accountability the perpetrators of human rights abuses. The

impact of the Guerrero commission's report was further dampened by the fact that it was published a few weeks after forty-three students were forcibly disappeared by drug cartels and police in the city of Iguala, a new tragedy that impacted Mexico, buoying its victims' movements and tarnishing the presidency of Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-2018).

The collective impact that these truth commissions have had, regionally, on the rewriting and retelling of national histories has been tremendous, although they have not always succeeded in creating juridical accountability for the perpetrators of human rights violations. I agree, however, with Stephen's argument that the work of truth commissions is important not only for "changing the 'truth' of what happened in conflicts" such as the 2006 movement, but also for its impact on the people who experience and retell these events, allowing people to bear witness, archive memories of trauma, and represent "personal histories within complex identity categories of race, ethnicity, gender, and class."<sup>27</sup> Following the collapse of the Espacio Ciudadano in 2012, other truth commission initiatives followed, including a proposal from the state governor, although none actually took off the ground. Nonetheless, the ground work laid by these inconclusive efforts generated new understandings of the histories they focused on, through public acts, transformations of the cityscape, publications, forums, and other means. Calls for local truth commissions resurfaced with the election of leftist presidential candidate, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, in 2018, as he made these a campaign promise, gaining him the support among many groups of victims of violence throughout Mexico.

## **Outline of Chapters**

This thesis is divided into two parts: Part 1 draws primarily on my ethnographic fieldwork in

---

<sup>27</sup> Stephen, *We Are the Face of Oaxaca*, 9.



Oaxaca City and focuses on the politics of memory surrounding the 2006 APPO uprising. I examine how youth activists and collectives connected their experiences in 2006 with their ongoing resistance in the years after the rebellion through different performances of rebel memory (chapter 2). I also examine efforts to create a truth commission and to demand reparations from the state for victims of violence in 2006, and I consider the reasons why some of these efforts failed.

The second half of the thesis moves backward in time, as well as forward, by turning to the history of the Loxicha prisoners and San Agustín Loxicha's humanitarian crisis following the EPR uprising in 1996 and the period of state terror and persecution that followed it. At the same time, we move forward chronologically, by examining these pasts in relation to their material presence in the 2010s: in the form of oral storytelling in prison cells, and in the daily lives and stories of women in San Agustín Loxicha seeking to grapple with a collective legacy of trauma and silence. Among the prisoners, the material presence of the past hung particularly heavily. For them, history became an identity and curse, as well as the animus of their political activism, therefore, making generation of alternative histories and stories critically important.

By the 2010s, the Loxicha struggle had become inextricably connected in activist and popular imaginations to the events of 2006, of which it had become an "antecedent." Many Oaxacans, particularly on the left, now read the prisoners of 2011 and the events of 1996 through the prism of 2006, which had become the central node in the leftist construction of political genealogies and cartographies. Yet the APPO uprising did directly impact the lives of the prisoners—during and after the uprising—as well as their own understandings of Oaxacan history and their place in it. During the uprising, when the police disappeared through much of the city and teachers camped outside the prison would carve holes in the wall and serve prisoners mezcal through a hose, according to one prisoner's account; and, later, with the huge influx of new political prisoners, now from the APPO. Chapters 4-6 draw on my ethnography in Ixcotel and Etna prisons among the Loxicha prisoners and their solidarity networks and relatives and our collaborations in recording

oral testimonies, as well my ethnographic collaborations and oral histories in San Agustín Loxicha. The prologue to part II of the dissertation elaborates further on the topics of testimony and memory among Loxicha Zapotecs, reflecting on the complex temporal and narrative dimensions of their stories and story-tellings.

Chapter 1 opens with an examination of the politics of memory in the judicial archive and the ways in which once-buried testimonies that once served as instruments of counterinsurgency in the 1970s were exhumed and resurrected in the early 2000s by activist historians in the interest of “historical truth,” in the spirit of truth commissions (although no such national commission has been created).<sup>28</sup> I present a close reading of the written *testimonio* (in this case, a legal statement) of Alberto Ulloa, a political prisoner from Mexico City and a survivor of forced disappearance and the hands of the military during the 1970s, and of the memoir he wrote three decades later. I thus cross-examine Ulloa’s legal *declaración* in the archives of the PRI’s political police through the memoir, which he wrote in tandem with the rehabilitation of these police archives in the 2000s. I then reflect on the competing and overlapping archival logics of a judicial testimony produced in the interest counterinsurgency during the Cold War and of its subsequent rehabilitation and repurposing as an element of “truth and justice” in the 2000s.<sup>29</sup>

The second and third chapters shift the focus to the state of Oaxaca in the aftermath of the 2006

---

<sup>28</sup> The subject of truth commissions resurfaced forcefully after the 2018 presidential election and the triumph of the center-left politician Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who has promised to create various national, as well as regional, truth commissions, as part of a broader process of national reconciliation.

<sup>29</sup> The Dirección Federal de Seguridad (Federal Security Agency) operated as the PRI’s political police until 1982. The archival collection of DFS contains intelligence and police reports on political movements from the 1960s to the 1980s. The DFS collection thus documents episodes of the persecution of leftists, beyond the armed left, during the Cold War. It was declassified in the early 2000s, following the PRI’s first presidential loss (although the PRI moved to restrict these documents once more after returning to power in 2012), making it a valuable source for largely untapped information on both political movements and their relationship with the state. These documents include internal memorandums, police investigations, espionage reports, and the testimonies of arrested activists. Due to the state’s concern with political dissidence and control, these documents present an impressive wealth of information on the activities of protest movements and radical organizations, as well as the practices of the state security apparatus during the Cold War. See Laura Castellanos and Alejandro Jiménez Martín del Campo, *México Armado 1943-1981* (Mexico, D.F.: Ediciones Era, 2007).

uprising of the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca. Chapter 2 examines the experiences of radical youth in the APPO movement and how they turned memories and commemorations of the experiences of 2006 into elements of their ongoing political projects. This chapter draw on ethnographic fieldwork and interviews that I conducted in Oaxaca City in 2008, while the effervescence of the APPO movement was still hot.

When I returned to Oaxaca in 2011, now for an period of more than two years, I began focusing on and participating with the work of civil society and leftist collectives around “truth and justice” work, particularly around the formation of a truth commission about the 2006 uprising in Oaxaca and reparations and dignity for victims of violence, linking Oaxaca’s issues around political violence with an emergent national debate over the violence of the drug war, also since 2006. Yet, in the midst of this truth commission and public memory work, it was once more the awkward fits of this movement that captured my attention and became the focus of my research and my alignments: Namely, the long-term political prisoners from Loxicha and their controversial and polarizing allies inside the “truth and justice” coalition. I will return to this case further on. In sum, it was the struggles and stories that even the mainstream left wanted to leave alone, wished to forget or, at times, even silence.

Chapter 3 turns to the political project of “truth and justice” as it was implemented and pursued by civil society, NGOs and organizations of victims of state violence from 2006, now five years after the uprising, as they attempted to make memory, truth and justice, through various means, including the occupation and physical transformations of public spaces, participation in a burgeoning national peace movement, and the pursuit of a truth commission to investigate state violence during periods of social upheaval in recent Oaxacan history. While the focus of these efforts and the proposed truth commission naturally centered around the events of the 2006 movement, certain activists tried steering the coalition of organizations, the Espacio Ciudadano, towards focusing on the events of 1996 as well, when the state and

federal governments militarily occupied the Zapotec region of Loxicha and incarcerated hundreds of indigenous men on blanket charges of participating in a guerrilla attack against Mexican marines and police. Seven of those considered the longest ongoing case of political prison were still in prison at the time, in 2011-2012. However, members of the coalition were reluctant to throw in their solidarity with these prisoners or stake a claim regarding the history of human rights violations in Loxicha. I end the chapter by reflecting on the outcomes of the two solidarity events at Ixcotel Prison—one outside, and one inside—which I narrate in the preface.

The second half of the dissertation then focuses on the case of the Loxicha prisoners and the history of violence, solidarity, and historical memory work surrounding their struggles. Chapter 4 is based on one year of fieldwork in the home town of the Loxicha prisoners, the Zapotec municipality of San Agustín Loxicha in the south of Oaxaca. There I conducted dozens of interviews and consulted local archives around the living memory and legacies of the political prisoners—their absence—and the experiences of political organizing (OPIZ) and state violence surrounding the prisoners' story. Here, silences are important.

I examine the historical, political, and social context that gave rise to a radical indigenous movement in San Agustín Loxicha, in the 1980s, as well as the state violence that devastated the region and generated hundreds of Loxicha prisoners in the 1990s. The chapter moves between scales of time and place—what the Zapatistas call “calendars and geographies”—presenting the reader with a history of Oaxaca's indigenous communities, the development of revolutionary movements, state terror, and human rights discourse in Mexico during the second half of the 20th Century, and, lastly, the political landscape of San Agustín Loxicha during Mexico's turn towards neoliberalism in the 1980s. The latter part of the chapter introduces the story of Alberto Antonio-Antonio (“Don Beto”), the radical mayor of San Agustín Loxicha (1984-86), co-founder of the Organization of Indigenous Zapotec Pueblos—Emiliano Zapata (OPIZ-EZ), and eventual Loxicha prisoner. Prisoners and inhabitants of Loxicha prisoners whom I interviewed broadly

identify the emergence of Loxicha's political conflict with the figure of Don Beto and the event of the destruction of San Agustín Loxicha's municipal palace in 1984. My argument is that this event—the destruction of the municipal palace—marks a watershed moment in the memory of Loxicha's inhabitants, providing material and linguistic elements with which to articulate political struggle and historical memory work, and coagulating a complex scenario involving multiple actors and forces within a tangible narrative framework that anchors memory and politics to the material landscape of the town. This chapter draws on a combination of prisoner testimonies, as well as oral histories of inhabitants of Loxicha.

Chapter 5 is based on several years of intermittent fieldwork and solidarity work in and around Oaxacan prisons and, in particular, on the oral histories of four of the last Loxicha prisoners, which I recorded over several years in Ixcotel and Etna prisons. The bulk of these interviews were recorded between 2012 and 2013—by hand, in a notebook, inside the prisons—however, I continued visiting and interviewing the prisoners at least once every year after that, until the last prisoners were released in 2017.

This chapter examines the testimonies of former Loxicha prisoners and erstwhile OPIZ militants from San Agustín Loxicha serving long-term prison sentences: Abraham García Ramírez and Zacarías García López. My purpose is to give the reader an inside view of the lives of indigenous political prisoners in Oaxaca, and of what it means to grow up in a peasant community experiencing rapid political and economic change, to become immersed in radical grassroots politics—at the margins of, and in opposition to the state—and to then undergo prolonged incarceration for it. Abraham and Zacarías' voices convey the humanity and complexity of the extraordinarily difficult lives lived by these two men, as well as the poignancy of their hopefulness and desire for life. Interwoven in the twin narratives of the two prisoners, the argument of this chapter, is that the prisoners' voices reveal a void, in living contours and spectral shadows, that was left by a failed revolution and the silent reassertion of violent oppression in its wake.

These voices reveal and articulate silent trajectories of grassroots resistance, as well as grassroots

violence, in a dialogue rendered across two prisons, mediated by the feet and the notebook of the anthropologist. As oral histories these voices are themselves traces of the past. They are the expressions of subjects at once radical and shrewd, and traumatized and marooned; they are also expressions of deeply rooted Zapotec values and ways of telling a story or interpreting the world—reflections of the multiple shifting “calendars and geographies” of prisons and mountains. They are expressions (political, artistic, traditional) of living memory, and the only traces of this history of violence capable of articulating and outlining the void left by a failed revolutionary project and a silencing reassertion of violence in its wake. Through testimony, they repurpose it as something generative.

The final chapter (6) focuses on the testimony and my interactions with a single subject, Aureliano, a two time Loxicha prisoner who was “disappeared” by the Mexican state—in an unsettling echo of the story of Alberto Ulloa and the practices of state terror used against dissidents in the 1970s (chapter 1)—and then tortured over a period of nine months, before being “re-appeared” and thrown into prison. This chapter is about the narrating of violence, the affective half-life of torture, and the embodied poetics of testimony. It reflects on and takes the form of a fragmented life story—that of a Mexican rickshaw driver haunted by traumatic memories of being abducted and tortured by the Mexican military for alleged clandestine activities as an indigenous guerrilla in the 1990s.

Aureliano’s testimony reveals viscerally saturated memories of what it was like to be forcibly “disappeared” (*desaparecido/a*) and routinely tortured. His words and stories also reveal what it means to live, in the present, with the traumatic imprints of a none too distant violent past. After being “re-appeared” through a state-of-exceptional sleight of legal hand, there came time in state prison, a hunger strike, federal prison; eventually, liberation. Yet, even in freedom, the prison has not left him entirely. The scent of certain deodorants, the taste of certain foods, and certain songs or combinations of words are all part of a constant barrage of reminders and triggers that meld past and present. Testimony emerges here as more than a

historical text or an expression of memory or ideology. For someone who has been tortured, and for whom this torture was tied to acts of forced confession, the act of orally narrating these experiences can be particularly fraught and visceral. Giving testimony reenacts the destruction of the world and language that is involved in torture and giving a (testimonial) forced confession—yet it simultaneously enacts a reconstruction of the world and of language, as voice attempts to subsume and channel the droning of violence.

Finally, the epilogue examines the transition from prison to freedom for the last Loxicha prisoners. It is based on my first interactions with Álvaro, Abraham, and Zacarías (the last three prisoners to obtain their freedom) to take place outside of a prison, including my first interviews with the newly free former Loxicha prisoners, in late 2017 and early 2018.

## **Conclusions**

My thesis offers multiple perspectives on how to think about social movements and memory. Drawing on a multidisciplinary approach, I bring together a range of theoretical approaches, including engaged anthropology, social movement studies, the politics of memory, and self-reflexive ethnographic approaches, which collectively help shed light on a subject that is complex and often misunderstood. This approach poses larger implications for thinking about social movements, violence, and memory in Mexico and Latin America, as well as other parts of the world, including the contemporary United States—from the outbursts of solidarity and protest in Mexico in reaction to the disappearance of forty-three students from the Ayotzinapa Normal School in Guerrero in 2014 and subsequent demands for the creation of a truth commission, to more distant cases, such as the emergence of explicitly Zapatista-influenced autonomist revolutionary councils in Kurdish Rojava in Northern Syria, or the impacts of mass incarceration upon

marginalized communities and activists in the United States, and the emergence of historically-minded movements such as Black Lives Matter.

This thesis is also a record of a long and moving journey—of several, in fact—and I now invite you, the reader, to follow me in the pages ahead to learn about some of the hidden faces and silent voices of a Mexico that was unknown to me as well, even though I am myself a Mexican, and about some of the journeys that have now led them to you.

-\*-



**Part I: Voices in the Wake of Fire**

-\*-

## Chapter 1. Speak, Documents: The Prison and the Archive

*The soul is the prison of the body.*

-- Michel Foucault<sup>30</sup>

On September 4, 1974 Alberto Ulloa Bornemann was arrested on a country road in the state of Morelos, a short distance south of Mexico City. When the police searched Ulloa's white Volkswagen Beetle they found illustrated Spanish translations of Chinese communist pamphlets, as well as a few cassettes containing homemade recordings of speeches by Lucio Cabañas Barrientos, the most heavily persecuted guerrilla leader in Mexico at that time.<sup>31</sup> The night of his arrest Ulloa was interrogated by soldiers at the military barracks in Cuernavaca, before being sent, hands tied and blindfolded in the back of a car, to Mexico City's Campo Militar Número Uno. Ulloa would spend the next two months isolated in a clandestine underground prison below the military base. To his family and the rest of the world outside, there was no record to indicate that he was alive or dead; nothing aside from the fact that he was arrested and supposedly released in Cuernavaca—after that, he simply ceased to exist. Like Ulloa, thousands of people were forcibly disappeared (*desaparecidos*) by the Mexican army and police as part of the “dirty war”

---

<sup>30</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 30.

<sup>31</sup> Castellanos and Jiménez Martín del Campo, *México Armado 1943-1981*, 153.

Castellanos, Laura. *México Armado 1943-1981*. México, D.F.: Publicaciones Era, 2007: 153.

Juan Fernando Reyes Peláez, “El Largo Brazo Del Estado: La Estrategia Contrainsurgente Del Gobierno Mexicano.,” in *Movimientos armados en México, siglo XX*, ed. Verónica Oikión Solano and Marta Eugenia García Ugarte (Zamora, Michoacán: Colegio de Michoacán; México, DF: CIESAS, 2006), 412.

against the radical left, from the mid-1960s to mid-1980s.<sup>32</sup> Many of them still remain disappeared. Ulloa was lucky. On November 14, an agent of the Ministerio Público (Public Prosecutor's Office) appeared at the clandestine prison to take Ulloa's testimony, finally initiating a formal criminal investigation.

Incommunicado in the underground cell, Ulloa had spent two months under a state-of-exception, a pocket outside of the rule of law and official purview of the state. So long as there was no body to prove he was dead, and no record to prove he was alive and in custody, the state could abjure all responsibility over him. By writing his name on paper, the prosecutor effectively restored Ulloa's existence among the (formally) living, and thrust him once more under the purview of paper, bureaucracy, and the penal system.

To give testimony (*dar una declaración*) before the Ministerio Público (MP) tends to be a tedious and gray experience that ordinary Mexicans go through any time they become involved in a criminal investigation. The *declaración* given by Alberto Ulloa in 1974, however, is anything but colorless. It is a fascinating document, not only because of the biography it narrates—that of a would-be revolutionary—or because it was produced in a clandestine prison, but also because of the extraordinary biography of the document itself. A close reading, not only of the testimony's contents, but of its own travails, reveals the ways in which such documents were used in the 1970s as instruments of the state, for intelligence-gathering and counterinsurgency; yet, three decades later, the same document would be transformed into an instrument *against* the state at the hands of a truth commission, and in the hands of Ulloa himself, who drew on his old *declaración* in composing his memoir in 2004.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> In the context of Cold War-era “dirty wars” in Latin America, the term “to disappear” became widely used as a transitive verb—ie, to disappear (someone)—in order to refer to this common practice of governments. A person is said to be *desaparecido/a* when there is no evidence of their being alive or dead. Families of disappeared persons often state that even the certainty of death would be preferable to the anguish of not knowing. In recent years the issue of *desaparecidos/as* has once again flared up across Mexico on account of the violence unleashed by President Felipe Calderon's (2006-2012) war on organized crime.

<sup>33</sup> Alberto Ulloa Bornemann, *Declaración ante el Ministerio Público*, 14 November 1974, Archivo General de la Nación, Dirección Federal de Seguridad (hereafter cited as AGN-DFS), exp. 100-10-16.4.74 L10. And Alberto Ulloa Bornemann, *Sendero en tinieblas* (México, D.F.: Ediciones Cal y Arena, 2004). An English language version of Ulloa's memoir was published in 2010 under the title *Surviving Mexico's Dirty War: A Political Prisoner's Memoir*; however, I have not consulted it for the present chapter. Quotations from Ulloa's memoir are based on my own translations of the Spanish original.

The Party of the Institutional Revolution (Partido Revolucionario Institucional, PRI) ruled over Mexico for 71 years before losing the presidency in 2000. With Vicente Fox of the National Action Party (Partido Acción Nacional, PAN) as president, the first post-PRI government moved to fulfill campaign promises to investigate and prosecute the state's crimes during the "dirty war" (roughly 1965-1982). In the early 2000s, the new government declassified portions of the archives of the PRI's defunct special police forces, such as the Dirección Federal de Seguridad (DFS), which was responsible for many of the atrocities committed against supposed subversives. These documents contain important information pertaining to the 1968 and 1971 student massacres, as well as the persecution of guerrilla movements in the sixties, seventies, and eighties. In addition to declassifying these documents, the Fox government also formed something akin to a truth commission, in the form of the Fiscalía Especial para Movimientos Sociales y Políticos del Pasado (FEMOSPP), which was charged with investigating human rights violations and other crimes committed by the state over the preceding decades. In theory, the commission's findings would serve not only to establish certain historical truths for the benefit of Mexican society, but to form a body of evidence that could be used to legally prosecute the perpetrators of human rights violations.<sup>34</sup> The FEMOSPP project was ultimately aborted by the Procuraduría General de la República (PGR), and its report censored.<sup>35</sup> No government official or agent was ever taken to trial. However, in 2006 the National Security Archive leaked a draft of the commission's report which was considerably more extensive than the censored version released by the PGR.<sup>36</sup> To date this leaked report presents one of the most important accounts of the breadth of the state's systematic repression of dissidents during the "dirty war." Alberto Ulloa's 1974 *declaración*, along with

---

<sup>34</sup> See

Carlos Montemayor, *La guerrilla recurrente* (México: Debate, 2007). See also the leaked FEMOSPP report: José Sotelo, ed., "Informe Histórico a La Sociedad Mexicana, ¡Qué No Vuelva a Suceder! (Borrador Del Informe de La Fiscalía Especial Para Movimientos Sociales y Políticos Del Pasado)," 2006, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB209/index.htm>.

<sup>35</sup> The PGR is akin to the Attorney General's Office in the United States.

<sup>36</sup> The National Security Archive (NSA), founded in 1985, is an investigative journalism center, research institution, and archive at George Washington University in Washington, D.C. and a significant repository of declassified U.S. government documents. <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/about>.

hundreds of others like it in the DFS archive, became crucial sources in that exercise in the reconstruction of historical memory. In fact, Ulloa's 2004 memoir is one of the most cited documents in the FEMOSPP report.

In the last decade and a half, it has thus become possible to reconstruct some of what went on in the interrogation rooms and clandestine prisons during Mexico's dirty war. In addition to the FEMOSPP report, testimonies by former political prisoners and a growing body of scholarship about this period have begun to cast light on the darker side of Mexico's "perfect dictatorship" under the PRI.<sup>37</sup>

Following Shahid Amin and the work of the Subaltern Collective Studies, this chapter attempts "to interrogate the interrogators," combing through the forced confession that is Ulloa's *declaración* for evidence of the testifier's speech.<sup>38</sup> While testimony is at the heart of this chapter, it attempts to read Ulloa's *declaración* as more than just a testimonial source. This chapter is, foremost, a methodological and conceptual exercise in reading the *declaración* as a multifaceted object, one that tells numerous interwoven stories, and has been used by a variety of actors and at different times and for starkly different purposes.

Many stories in one, and each of them two: This chapter tells the story of Alberto Ulloa Bornemann's two testimonies: the *declaración* composed by the MP agent in a clandestine military prison in 1974, and the memoir (*testimonio político*) that Ulloa himself wrote nearly thirty years later. It is also the story of the two souls of Alberto Ulloa: that of a radical, dogmatic youth, and that of the jaded graying bureaucrat. Ulloa's *declaración* is archived in Mexico City's Lecumberri Palace, a former prison that today

---

<sup>37</sup> Mario Vargas Llosa came up with the moniker "*la dictadura perfecta*" for the PRI, which held power in Mexico from 1929 to 2000, and again from 2012 to 2018. On the dirty war and social movements in Mexico during the 1960s and 1970s, see O'Neill Blacker, "Cold War in the Countryside: Conflict in Guerrero, Mexico," *The Americas* 66, no. 2 (2009): 181–210; Verónica Oikión Solano and Marta Eugenia García Ugarte, eds., *Movimientos armados en México, siglo XX* (Zamora, Michoacán: Colegio de Michoacán; México, DF: CIESAS, 2006); Castellanos and Jiménez Martín del Campo, *México Armado 1943-1981*; Montemayor, *La guerrilla recurrente*; Marco Bellingeri, *Del agrarismo armado a la guerra de los pobres: ensayos de guerrilla rural en el México contemporáneo, 1940-1974* (Mexico, D.F.: Ediciones Casa Juan Pablos : Gobierno del Distrito Federal, Secretaría de Cultura de la Ciudad de México, 2003).

<sup>38</sup> Shahid Amin, *Event, Metaphor; Memory: Chauri Chaura, 1922-1992* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 1.

houses the Archivo General de la Nación (AGN)—the same Lecumberri where political prisoners, including Ulloa, were held in the 1970s. This is thus also the story of the two lives of Lecumberri, the prison cum archive, and of Ulloa’s two inhabitations within its walls—first as body, then as paper.

Beyond serving as an oral history—albeit, one filtered through the words and priorities of the interrogator—Ulloa’s testimony allows us to consider the significance of such documents as tools of power. The second argument of this paper is that by reading “against the grain” of the *declaración*, we can glean some of the ways in which the state used such documents as instruments of counterinsurgency during the dirty war.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, a cross-examination of the 1974 testimony and 2004 memoir reveals the extent to which the practices of forced disappearance, imprisonment and torture served to extract *de facto* confessions from political prisoners. As the hidden dialogue between testifier and prosecutor shows, these practices were used to gather information that would allow state agents to identify, persecute and dismember the vast networks of radicals and revolutionaries that extended across Mexican territory.

Lastly, I contend that it is possible to approach these documents ethnographically—not only as *sources* of information, but as objects with social lives and biographies, which can be traced over time.<sup>40</sup> The *declaración*, along with the other declassified security records from the dirty war, have lived more than once: first as instruments of counterinsurgency in the 1970s, then as sources of historical memory in the 2000s. Once declassified, these documents partook in two overlapping, yet distinct “archival logics” (to use an expression of Ann Stoler’s), having served for two opposing political projects. Ultimately, both projects

---

<sup>39</sup> The notion of reading colonial documents “against the grain” is particularly associated with the work of the Subaltern Studies Collective. For instance, see Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford, 1983); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

<sup>40</sup> I am drawing on the methodological and theoretical insights of Ann Stoler, Jean Hébrard, and Arjun Appadurai. See Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); Jean Hébrard, “The Writings of Moïse (1898-1985): Birth, Life, and Death of a Narrative of the Great War,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 44, no. 2 (2002): 263–92; Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

and archival logics reflect two different conceptions of the relationship between truth, history, and justice.<sup>41</sup>

## Guerrero's Guerrillas and Mexico's Dirty War

While post-revolutionary Mexico was long considered exceptional within Latin America for its political and social stability under the PRI, guerrilla struggles and state repression were endemic throughout Mexico during the 1960s and 1970s. At this time, radicalized *campesinos* (peasants), workers, teachers, and students confronted the Mexican government through armed resistance, to which the latter often responded with violent repression. The epicenter of this conflict was the state of Guerrero, which in the late sixties and early seventies became Mexico's own Vietnam. The most powerful guerrilla force to emerge in Guerrero was that led by a schoolteacher named Lucio Cabañas Barrientos. Cabañas formed the Brigada Campesina de Ajusticiamiento del Partido de los Pobres (The Peasant Justice Brigade of the Party of the Poor, BCA-PDLP) in 1967, after federal police fired upon protesting teachers and peasants in the town of Atoyac. Taking up arms, Cabañas spent the next several years in the Atoyac mountains organizing and politicizing peasants, a process that he called "*hacer pueblo*" (to make community, or to make a people).<sup>42</sup> His success at organizing an armed force was such that by 1974, nearly one third of *all* of Mexico's armed forces had been sent to Guerrero to quell the insurgency and control the *pueblo/s* (villages, community) that supported it.<sup>43</sup> The ensuing conflict produced the highest levels of violence in Mexico since the 1920s Cristero

---

<sup>41</sup> Weld presents a similar argument in her work on the secret police archives from Guatemala's dictatorship: "Though the documentary collection is composed of one physical set of papers, those papers have at different historical moments represented two distinct *archival logics*—two organizing principles, or two reasons for being. The first logic was one of surveillance, social control, and ideological management, a Cold War-inflected logic that used archives as a weapon against enemies of the state. The second logic, emerging from the records' rescue, is one of democratic opening, historical memory, and the pursuit of justice for war crimes—again using archives as a weapon, but to very different ends." Weld suggests that the evolution from the first archival logic offers "a narrative arc that maps onto the country's broader transition from war to an unstable peace." Weld, *Paper Cadavers*, 6.

<sup>42</sup> In Spanish "*el pueblo*" can refer to a particular town, as well as a community, a people, or *the* people. In common parlance, the term can refer to several of these meanings at the same time. See Paul K. Eiss, *In the Name of El Pueblo: Place, Community, and the Politics of History in Yucatán* (Durham, 2010).

<sup>43</sup> Estimates of the military presence in Guerrero in the early 1970s vary. See Reyes Peláez, "El Largo Brazo Del Estado: La Estrategia Contrainsurgente Del Gobierno Mexicano.," 412; Castellanos and Jiménez Martín del Campo, *México Armado 1943-*

Rebellion. In its war against the Party of the Poor and other guerrillas across Mexico, the Mexican government employed counter-insurgency techniques more often associated with Central and South American military dictatorships, including torture, forced disappearances, the displacement of entire rural villages, mass graves, and the ejection of bodies from helicopters in mid-flight. By the late seventies these practices seemingly proved successful, having largely quelled all armed resistance across Mexico. In turn, the state also managed to impose an official silence over the violent events surrounding the dirty war, a silence that is still reflected in much of Mexican historiography.

By the late 1970s, the Mexican state had largely dismantled the most significant guerrilla movements in Mexico, including the Party of the Poor and the Asociación Cívica Nacional Revolucionaria (Revolutionary National Civic Association, ACNR) in Guerrero, and urban guerrilla movements in other states. The survivors of Guerrero's guerrilla movements, however, went on to form the Partido Revolucionario Obrero Campesino Unión del Pueblo-Partido de los Pobres (Revolutionary Worker Peasant Party Union of the People-Party of the Poor, PROCUP-PDLP), a new guerrilla organization consolidated out of the fusion of older organizations, in the 1980s and, subsequently, the Ejército Popular Revolucionario (Popular Revolutionary Army, EPR) in the 1990s. During this time the state of Oaxaca became another key arena for the clandestine revolutionary activities of these organizations.<sup>44</sup> Part 2 of this dissertation examines the social impacts of the re-emergence of armed insurgency targeting the state and of counterinsurgency targeting rural populations in the neighboring state of Oaxaca in the 1990s.

---

1981, 153.

<sup>44</sup> See Carlos Figueroa-Ibarra and Lorena Martínez-Zavala, "The Ejército Popular Revolucionario: Occupying the Cracks in Mexico's Hegemonic State," *Latin American Perspectives* 40, no. 5 (2013): 153–64; Castellanos and Jiménez Martín del Campo, *México Armado 1943-1981*.



## Fictions in the Archive<sup>45</sup>

On November 14, 1974 the Dirección Federal de Seguridad (DFS) and the Procuraduría General de la República (PGR) issued the following press release:<sup>46</sup>

*Six criminals [delinquentes] belonging to the gang of Lucio Cabañas and other groups operating in the Federal District were arrested in the state of Morelos.*

*Two of them participated in the robbery of the Banco Comercial México... having received instructions from Cabañas himself, to whom they gave the stolen bounty...*

*Today the Dirección Federal de Seguridad transferred the following group of detained suspects to the Procuraduría General de la República:*

*VICENTE ESTRADA VEGA (alias) "Jorge" or "Dionisio"*

*Dr. IGNACIO MARIO MADRAZO NAVARRO (alias) "Luis"*

*ALBERTO SALVADOR ULLOA BORNEMANN (alias) "Fausto"*

*MARIA TERESA FRANCO VEGA*

*RIGOBERTO LORENCE LOPEZ (alias) "Aureliano"*

*MARIA DE LOURDES QUIÑONES TREVIZO (alias) "Guadalupe"*

*They have confessed to committing several crimes. The first four were in contact with LUCIO CABAÑAS BARRIENTOS and two of them directly participated in the robbery, directed by the latter... on 18 April 1973, in which they obtained the sum of \$2,173,000.00 [pesos]...*

Another two press releases further added that Ulloa and Estrada had collaborated with Cabañas since 1972, driving him to various parts of Mexico in order to purchase weapons, and that the stolen money from the bank robbery was taken to Ulloa's home in Mexico City, where it was counted and distributed among them, in order to purchase arms for Cabañas' guerrilla organization in the state of Guerrero. They

---

<sup>45</sup> The title of this section is a reference to the classic work of Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Stanford University Press, 1987).

<sup>46</sup> Boletín de Prensa, 14 November 1973, AGN-DFS 100-10-16.4.74 L-10, p. 140-146.

also note that Cabañas once hid in Ulloa's home, where he was visited by a Dr. M., who treated Cabañas for the severe migraines afflicting him. The doctor attended Cabañas, it states, despite being "fully aware that the afflicted individual was a fugitive of the law, [who was] accused of numerous crimes, including assault, robbery, kidnapping, and homicide."<sup>47</sup>

By referring to the arrested suspects as mere *delincuentes*, (criminals), *asaltantes* (thiefs) and the like, these statements reduce their actions to "crimes," devoid of political implications. They conveniently manipulate and misrepresent the confessions in the suspects' testimonies, which they are purportedly based on.<sup>48</sup> Aside from their obvious bias, however, what is most notable in these press releases is what they do *not* say. There is one particular piece of information missing in the press releases, which is of clear importance, even though it could easily go unnoticed by news editors or readers: the press releases state that the arrests took place in the state of Morelos, suggesting that they all occurred at the same place and time, but none of them actually mention *when* the arrests actually took place. One states that the federal police transferred the suspects over to the Attorney General's office earlier that day, while another states simply that the *delincuentes* "were arrested," with no mention of time. As Ulloa's testimony and memoir indicate, however, he was the only person mentioned in the press statements who was actually arrested in Morelos. The others were all detained in Mexico City, and the two men who were arrested together with Ulloa simply go unmentioned. All of the Mexico City arrests took place around November 10, while Ulloa had been arrested more than two months earlier, on September 4, along with another man named Javier Gaytán Saldivar (aka "Jacobo").<sup>49</sup>

The reason that the press releases had to bundle all of the arrests into one event is that during the

---

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Ulloa, *Sendero*, 170.

<sup>49</sup> Ulloa, Declaración, AGN-DFS, exp. 100-10-16.4.74 L10, p.74. Gaytan Saldivar, who was arrested along with Ulloa and also taken to Campo Militar Número Uno, was not transferred to the PGR along with the other prisoners, though it is unclear as to why. It is unclear whether he was ever released from the Campo Militar Número Uno or whether he remains disappeared.

preceding two months, Ulloa had been *desaparecido* in the underground prison at Campo Militar Número Uno. This practice was, of course, illegal, if not uncommon; therefore, official documentation had to manipulate the recent past in order to *create* a legal operation, at least on paper, and denying the occurrence of any extralegal actions. However, it was Ulloa's earlier arrest and illegal captivity that made the latter arrests in November possible.

During nearly two months that he spent in an underground cell beneath Campo Militar Número Uno, Ulloa was repeatedly tortured. In his memoir he painstakingly recalls how he cracked under the pressure of repeated physical and psychological torture, telling his tormentors what they most wanted to know: who his comrades and associates were, and where to find them. The information that Ulloa revealed under torture, or the threat of torture, is what enabled the police to make the other five arrests in November 1974. That same confession then became the basis for the ironically titled *declaración*, which Ulloa narrated before the MP agent a few days later.

## The prosecutor

In 2004 Ulloa would recall that,

*Somewhere around the third day after the five detentions [in November], an agent of the Ministerio Público indicted the four of us (Dionisio, Olivia, Luis, and me) in processes plagued by juridical irregularities from beginning to end. That was when they took our frontal and profile photographs for the first time. I recall that the official heading the operation had distinguished features and mannerisms, perhaps around fifty years old, with fair skin and a fine trimmed moustache, prematurely balding, gray temples, summarily upset about the use to which we had put the three hundred thousand pesos that Lucio Cabañas donated to us to advance the Organization's productive and financial tasks (planting of basic foods, corn and beans, and raising goats and pigs).<sup>50</sup>*

---

<sup>50</sup> Ulloa, *Sendero*, 170.

When the prosecutor arrived at the secret detention center in Mexico City's Campo Militar Número Uno on November 14, he recorded the testimony of a man who was depressed and dirty, "morally and physically broken," in Ulloa's later recollection. For over two months he had been kept in the underground prison, subject to beatings and interrogations, entirely isolated from the outside world. No one, not his wife, daughter, parents or friends, knew what had happened to him since September 4, nor were they even aware that he had been arrested. Even had they known, there was no way to locate him, as there was no trace of him, not in the criminal courts, police stations, or prisons. The prison beneath Campo Militar Número Uno did not formally exist—therefore, those who were imprisoned there did not formally exist. Ulloa had no idea whether he would ever leave that place alive; indeed, many never did.

Ulloa would later recall how he was driven to despair by the anguish of being aware that he was *desaparecido*, of being unable to communicate with his loved ones or let them know that he was alive.

*I brushed the limits [of despair] the night that a new group of prisoners arrived with their hands tied, blindfolded, their heads covered with hoods, Indians (as evinced by their voices) from some region in the Huasteca Hidalguense. I asked one of them, a man whose face I could not see and whose voice sounded like that of a man of seventy years or more, locked in the cell next to the one I occupied that night, where he came from, and he told me that it had been two years since he was detained in the sierra in Hidalgo, two long years of being separated from his loved ones.<sup>51</sup>*

The arrival of the MP agent to the military prison thus came as a boon to Ulloa, for a formal indictment seemed to signal the end of his forced disappearance. As a prisoner at the military camp, Ulloa had no legal rights or protection, because the camp itself was outside of the law, a state of exception.<sup>52</sup> The only paper traces of Ulloa since his arrest were a series of secret memorandums sent within the DFS, detailing the event of his arrest and his status as a suspect of subversive activities.<sup>53</sup> As noted earlier, when

---

<sup>51</sup> Ulloa, *Sendero*, 47.

<sup>52</sup> See Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

<sup>53</sup> Ulloa, *Sendero*, 277-285. Transcriptions of these documents appear as annexes in Ulloa's work, but they lack the citation of the AGN files. The *declaración* he gave before the Ministerio Público official, which this chapter focuses on, is not included among these transcriptions.

the prosecutor took Ulloa's testimony and opened a criminal case against him, he effectively brought him back under the jurisdiction of the court system. Thus, in writing the *declaración* and putting Ulloa on paper, he was thus placed back under the state of law.

*The subaltern make their own memories,  
but they do not make them just as they please.<sup>54</sup>*

One of the notable aspects of the *declaración* is that, although it was written by the prosecutor, its words seem largely to be those of Ulloa himself.<sup>55</sup> Various historians, Amin among them, have learned to “comb” through confessions, testimonies, police and inquisition records for their evidence, for that is where the unlettered decry, dissimulate, or narrate. Ulloa was certainly not unlettered, yet that is what makes his testimony a unique source, for we are able to compare the words taken from him in the prison with those that he wrote of his own volition years later. Upon reading the two testimonies side by side, one is struck by how much they resemble each other. The *declaración* consists of a dozen typewritten pages whereas the memoir approaches three hundred, yet they share similar narrative structures and present fairly similar accounts of the same events. However, as the passage by Amin alludes, subaltern narratives are invariably inflected by “hegemonic master narratives.” In other words, we cannot know with certainty to what extent Ulloa's memory shaped the official document in the prison, nor to what extent that document may have influenced Ulloa's reconstructed memories thirty years later as he wrote his book.

We do know that Ulloa accessed the documents about him in the DFS collection at the AGN, yet he

---

<sup>54</sup> Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory*, 118. One could take issue with referring to Ulloa as a “subaltern”, since he was born into an affluent family, a fact that had a direct bearing on his relatively short time in prison. As a *desaparecido* and a prisoner of the state, however, he was undoubtedly in a subaltern position vis-à-vis his captors. This does not change the fact that in the context of the outside world, many of his captors, poor and dark-skinned police agents, would be subaltern to the affluent and light-skinned Ulloa.

<sup>55</sup> This mixture of voices is common in this sort of document, on account of how they are produced.

does not mention specifically which documents he saw, and the *declaración* is not included among the DFS documents annexed to the memoir. Therefore, we are confronted with several possible explanations for the similarity between the two accounts: it is possible that Ulloa gave a fairly faithful account of the events he narrated, such that he remembered them in much the same way thirty years later, and that the agent recorded a faithful rendition of Ulloa's words at that time. It is also possible that Ulloa did read the *declaración* as he was writing his memoir, and that it shaped his own recollection of the events he describes. However, we can only speculate as to how closely the agent's written words resembled those uttered by Ulloa in 1974.

### **The *declaración***

*-----In Mexico City, Federal District, at ten in the morning on 13 November 1974, the individual who calls himself ALBERTO SALVADOR ULLOA BORNEMANN, in full use of his physical and mental capacities, was brought forth to testify in regard to the events set down in the body of the following act, and informed of the penalties incurred by those who present false testimony and before the witnesses identified at the end, he claims to go by the aforementioned name and to be thirty three years old, having been born on 24 April 1941, in Mexico City, Federal District, the son of SALVADOR ULLOA ROBLES and MARIA TERESA BORNEMANN IZUNZA, both of whom live at...<sup>56</sup>*

In the following section of the chapter, I present something akin to an oral history of<sup>57</sup> Alberto Ulloa

---

<sup>56</sup> Ulloa, *Declaración*, AGN-DFS, 100-10-16.4.74 L10, p.63. The text follows a standard format that is used by Public Prosecutor's office in recording the testimony of anyone involved in a criminal case, whether as suspects, witnesses, or denouncer. At the point where I wrote an ellipsis the original text on the photocopy of the *declaración* is blotted out by a thick black marker that covers several lines on the page. Archivists at the AGN do this in order conceal the personal information of third parties (in this case, Ulloa's parents, wife, and daughter).

<sup>57</sup> Granted, the *declaración* is *not* technically an oral history, but, rather, the product of an oral interlocution, traces of which were committed to paper by the MP official. However, the boundaries between these textual genres is fluid. The final chapter of the dissertation examines an actual oral history of a former Loxicha prisoner in Oaxaca, who was similarly disappeared, tortured, and sent to prison—and also survived to tell the story—following the emergence of armed conflict and counterinsurgency in Oaxaca, more than twenty years after Ulloa's disappearance.

Bornemann, based on the *declaración* that he gave to the prosecutor while he was a prisoner in Campo Militar Número Uno. Because I find the story in the document so compelling, I attempt to let it speak itself, by clearly differentiating what it says, and what I have to say with it or about it. Therefore, all the information that comes directly from the *declaración* appears in *italics*, whereas my own comments appear in unmarked font. Direct quotes duly appear in quotation marks. As the reader will note, the questions posed by the prosecutor were not included in the *declaración*, which takes the form of a continuous block of text narrated in the third person. It nonetheless contains clear traces of those questions, which I have left in place in order to make the interrogator more visible. The reader can sense his presence in phrases that appear again and again, such as “whose name he does not recall” or “the address of which he does not remember, though he could find it again and point it out if this were necessary,” as well as in the persnickety attention given to names, addresses, dates, license plates, streets, and to who gave what to whom, where, and how. The narrative provided the interrogator with “criminal evidence” necessary to prosecute the testifier, while names, license plate numbers and addresses provided the federal police with clues to hunt other suspects and evidence for future prosecutions. Indeed, the narrative is animated by the necessity to support an accusation, whereas Ulloa’s strategy of resistance is to produce a counter-narrative that seeks to avoid inculcation. The power to shape this narrative is ultimately in the hands of the prosecutor, yet he cannot completely hide Ulloa’s resistance.<sup>58</sup>

The document presents a generally coherent and chronological story, requiring little manipulation on my part in terms of structure. In translating and paraphrasing it I attempt to preserve a semblance of the original language, yet in order to render the document’s frequently awkward constructions and unbelievably long run-on sentences readable, I do substantially modify its syntax and style.

---

<sup>58</sup> I am grateful to Jean Hébrard for this insight.

## Speak, document

*Alberto Ulloa Bornemann was born on 24 April 1941 in Mexico City. From 1948 to 1955 he attended a public school linked to the Escuela Nacional de Maestros, and from 1956 to 1961 he attended middle school and high school at two different private institutions.<sup>59</sup> In 1961, at the age of twenty, he completed four years of a bachelor's degree [licenciatura] in information science and technique at the Universidad Iberoamericana—a private university run by Jesuits—the address of which he does not remember. He left the university without having obtained a degree, in order to dedicate himself to something that would provide him with an income, and because he felt dissatisfied with his chosen career.*

*That in January 1964, Ulloa worked for nine months in an advertising firm, Publicidad General, as assistant to the executive accountant, named EG. From September of that year through 1967, he then worked as chief of propaganda at the Center for Industrial Training, an affiliate of the Secretariat of Public Education (SEP). From 1968 to 1970, Ulloa worked for his father's company, Sur Publicidad, followed by a one year stint in the city of Tijuana, where he worked as manager for a restaurant and bar in a hotel owned by his father-in-law. He returned to Mexico City in 1971 and began producing radio programs for the Centro Nacional de la Productividad para el Programa Campesino, a government agency aimed at providing peasants [campesinos] with technical assistance.*

*“That with regard to his ideological formation in Marxism-Leninism, which he currently endorses,” Ulloa became versed in this philosophy through the solitary study of literary works such as “The Essays of Ché Guevara” [sic], ‘Passages on Revolutionary War,’ ‘What Is To Be Done’ by Lenin,*

---

<sup>59</sup> The sections in italics are drawn from Ibid, 63-75.



*'State and Revolution,' 'The Proletarian Revolution,' 'The Foundations of Leninism,' 'By Stalin,' [sic] etc.'*<sup>60</sup>

*Upon reading these texts, Ulloa became convinced that it was necessary to prepare himself as a revolutionary in accordance with this ideology.*

*That around this time, Ulloa became acquainted with a Cuban painter named R.A., who boasted of being the friend of Fidel Castro Ruz, and of being deeply knowledgeable about the social and political transformations taking place in Cuba since its revolution. This produced a growing desire in Ulloa to travel to Cuba and be trained as a guerrilla. Furthermore, Ulloa had recently read Che Guevara's message to the Tricontinental, urging the revolutionaries of all nations to join the struggle for socialism in Latin America. Fueled by these ideas and his friendship with A., Ulloa approached the Cuban embassy in Mexico with a request for financial support for a trip to Havana in order to carry out his plan. Failing to secure the requested funds, he acquired the money for the trip on his own and applied for a tourist visa at the Cuban consulate. After waiting three months for a visa, he purchased a ticket with Compañia Cubana de Aviación to travel to Havana, arriving there on 28 September 1967. Once in Havana, Ulloa took several letters of recommendation from A., and presented them to a number of Cuban officials, such as the Director of the Literature Department of the Casa de las Americas, the president of the Sociedad de Amistad Cubana-Mexicana named M., whose last name he does not remember, a painter at the Casa de las Americas, whose name he does not remember either, and the woman who processed his visa at the Cuban consulate, again not remembering the name of that woman, who had by then returned to Havana. Upon presenting these individuals with his letter of recommendation, he would then inform them of his interest in receiving ideological and military training and of participating in a nucleo guerrillero wherever they wished to send him. He hoped that in Havana he might be sent to some sort of agency specializing in such activities,*

---

<sup>60</sup> It might amuse the reader to note that the bureaucrat mistakenly took "By Stalin" to be the name of a text, rather than the author of "The Foundations of Leninism."

*through which he could be recruited, trained and sent to fight. However, because of the candidly open manner in which he expressed these goals, and because of his lack of revolutionary credentials in Mexico, he was prevented from achieving his goal and instead treated with certain distrust by those he sought out.*<sup>61</sup>

*That over the course of thirty days that he spent in Havana, Ulloa spent most of his time at the Instituto de Amistad Cubano-Mexicano and the Instituto Cubano de Arte e Industria Cinematográfica, going to literary presentations and movies about the Cuban revolution. As he realized that he would not be able to fulfill his revolutionary goals, he tried going to the Ministry of Labor to seek employment, but he was told that he would have to wait. A few days later, he was summoned by a Communist Party official, who informed him that it was the Cuban government's prerogative to choose its guests, and that such was not his case; therefore, he would have to return to Mexico City—though not before composing a handwritten declaración explaining his reasons for traveling to Cuba. One week later, a Cuban government official, who may have been a police agent, arrived at Ulloa's hotel and escorted him to the airport where he was put on a flight back to Mexico City, where he landed on 29 October 1967.*

In his memoir, Ulloa would later corroborate the story of his thwarted foray to Cuba. Yet it is probably not incidental that the official interviewing him dwelled on the episode at such length. During the 1960s and 70s the fight against Cuban-inspired subversion became an all too facile alibi for Latin American governments, including Mexico's, to justify the use of force against internal dissidence in the name of "national security." Although the threat posed by radical organizations was, arguably, relatively insignificant to the overall security of the state, the Mexican government greatly exaggerated this threat and the extent of Cuban influence among opposition movements. By thus exploiting Cold War politics, the Mexican government received financial, technical, and military support from the United States. National security also

---

<sup>61</sup> In the final statement of this passage, it seems possible that we are once again glimpsing traces of Ulloa's strategy of silent resistance: It is in Ulloa's best interest to ascertain that he was not trained as an agent by a foreign government, while it is unlikely that the prosecutor would be the one to move the conversation in this direction.

provided a justification for the persecution of dissidents, even beyond the armed left, and the deployment of violently repressive military campaigns in rural areas. Most notorious of these was the escalation of military operations in Guerrero during the hunt for Lucio Cabañas in the early seventies, which resulted in a siege of Atoyac de Álvarez and the surrounding countryside,<sup>62</sup> Echoes of the hunt for Lucio Cabañas would reverberate once again twenty years later, not only in Guerrero, but in the states of Chiapas and Oaxaca as well, with similarly destructive effects upon indigenous and peasant communities, as the second half of this dissertation demonstrates.<sup>63</sup>

*That upon returning to Mexico City in 1967, a man named R. (who would later distance himself from all revolutionary ideas) introduced Ulloa to Dr. I.M.N. and his wife M.P.M, who went by the aliases of “Luis” and “Teresa,” respectively, and were both members of the Liga Comunista Espartaco [Spartacus Communist League]. The couple recruited Ulloa into this organization, and he was assigned the task of composing and distributing flyers and pamphlets. At the beginning of 1968, the League set about distributing these flyers and its newspaper, Militante, in working class neighborhoods, such as Colonia Industrial Vallejo and Ferrería, taking advantage of a burgeoning mobilizations of workers, peasants and students. As the [1968] student movement gained real force in the course of that year, the League increased its propaganda efforts, embedding itself in the protests.*

*That he now remembers [“que ahora recuerda que...”],<sup>64</sup> that around March of that year, as he was*

---

<sup>62</sup> See Blacker, “Cold War in the Countryside: Conflict in Guerrero, Mexico”; G. M. Joseph, *In from the Cold: Latin America's New Encounter with the Cold War / Spenser, Daniela.*, American Encounters/Global Interactions; Variation: American Encounters/Global Interactions. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

<sup>63</sup> This is the same Lucio Cabañas whose statue stood facing a saluting Subcomandante Marcos with his back to the camera, in a framed photograph that hung prominently from the cell wall of a long-time Loxicha prisoner in Ixcotel Prison (see preface). The contents of the photograph and the cell wall around it, bundled tightly together in that corner like a visual political poem, spoke to the material and symbolic continuities connecting events in Guerrero in the 1970s, and those in Chiapas and Oaxaca in the 1990s and 2000s.

<sup>64</sup> It is notable that Ulloa “now” remembers, as it indicates that he was not remembering before. In the space between not remembering and remembering, there is an almost silent, yet clear, intervention on the part of the prosecutor. The contents of the intervention are difficult to determine, but could easily have involved violence, based on surrounding evidence.

*distributing flyers calling on the working class to join the fight for socialism, Ulloa was detained by the Preventive Police, taken to police station, and released after four hours, after being given a warning [“una llamada a la atención”].*

*That in the aftermath of the events of 2 October 1968—when soldiers fired upon a large gathering of student demonstrators in the Tlatelolco Plaza, killing hundreds, and injuring, arresting and “disappearing” many more—there came a demobilization of organizations that had participated in the protests. From their own vantage points, then, each of these organizations analyzed the outcomes of these events and the question of what road to then follow—a discussion that departed from the assumption that the possibility of legal and open struggle had become exhausted. This quandary thus produced a split within the Liga Comunista Espartaco. One faction, led by M.R. and B. maintained that the League had made the right decision in participating in the mobilizations, politicizing and raising the consciousness of the masses. The other faction, led by one “Arturo” and others whose pseudonyms he cannot recall, argued that communists should not participate in democratic movements, for they are petite-bourgeois movements, which are easily manipulated [“mediatizables”] because of the limited goals they set for themselves—goals such as the acquisition of a piece of land, a small house, a slightly higher level of education that might allow them to improve their individual economic situation.<sup>65</sup>*

*That in spite of being divided in this way, the League’s Central Committee decided to keep Ulloa in charge of its press and the publication of Militante. He did this until May 1970, when tensions grew between him and certain members of the organization: first, because some began saying that he was too well known to the police and, second, because Ulloa himself had become weary of the internal rifts within the organization, which led to endless fighting over interpretive positions rather than getting anything*

---

<sup>65</sup> This passage is striking, in that it reads like a lecture on these revolutionary organizations and their internal and external oppositions. It reads also as though the prosecutor was notably well versed in the subtleties of these oppositions, allowing him to hold an almost technical discussion with his captive.

accomplished. Under pressure from his father-in-law, who urged him to abandon his political activities, Ulloa then moved briefly to Tijuana.

*That upon his return to Mexico City in April 1971 and wishing to return to his political activities [with the Spartacus League], he contacted M.R., who put him back in charge of publishing Popular, the periodical that had replaced Militante. Tired of this routine, however, Ulloa requested that he be given tasks that would bring him in contact with el pueblo [the people]. He therefore begins making short trips to rural communities in the State of Mexico, on the outskirts of the city, in order to do “social work and indoctrination [work].” These efforts did not yield positive results for the group, however, and were cut short in mid-1972. It was at then that Ulloa became acquainted with P.G.J., “Isauro,” who invites him to join an organization of peasant cooperatives in the state of Morelos. since that they could use the “cultural preparation” that Ulloa had acquired. It was in this way that Ulloa gets acquainted with this new group known simply as “the Organization.” This group was organized around the long term goals of politicizing and generating consciousness among campesinos, as a means of convincing them of the need for radical changes in the social and economic structures of the state.<sup>66</sup> The Organization also sought to organize campesinos into productive cooperatives that would “strengthen their collective economy,” thus demonstrating to them the benefits of collective systems of labor. It was around this time that Isauro introduced Ulloa to V.E.V., who went by the pseudonym “Dionisio.” explaining to him that the latter was the lead figure within the new organization, particularly with respect to its work in the countryside, the rancherías at the edges of the states of Morelos and Puebla.*

---

<sup>66</sup> One of The Organization’s leaders, “Dionisio,” would later mock such interactions between Marxist proselytizers and peasants with an anecdote from the encounters between rural and urban revolutionaries that occurred in Guerrero’s *sierra* in the early seventies: An urban Marxist tries to teach the tenets of Marxism to a group of peasant guerrilleros: Alright, he says, let’s review the lesson. Pedro, what is the state? To which the latter responds, why, it’s the sad state that we find ourselves in! Dionisio retells this conversation in Gerardo Tort’s excellent documentary about Lucio Cabañas. Gerardo Tort, *The guerilla and the hope Lucio Cabañas* ([México]: Macondo cine [éd.]; Chicago (Ill.): Facets video [distrib.], 2006).

In his memoir, Ulloa remembers Dionisio as having a “semi-rural background,” on account of which he “knew how to present himself and gain the trust” of *campesinos*. In Ulloa’s estimation, Dionisio lacked the “broad, solid, and deep theoretical preparation necessary to be the leader of a revolutionary process.” Nonetheless, he praises the critical and progressive manifesto co-authored by Dionisio, which catalyzed the division within the Liga Espartaco. It was in this manifesto that Dionisio and the rural *espartacos* wrote of the need for revolutionaries to engage with the cultural dimensions of politics and seek to transform peasant and worker consciousness. In order to accomplish these goals, it claimed, the *espartacos* would have to, *Servir al pueblo, uniéndose a él* (“Serve the people by being one with them”).<sup>67</sup>

Much of Ulloa’s political sensibilities, aspirations and travails were shaped by his desire to get to know “the people,” to be among them, to work with and for them. This desire was in part compounded in part by his fervent espousal of Maoism, which posited that the revolutionary should move among the people “as a fish moves in water.” Many Mexican radicals at this time considered Maoism the most appropriate revolutionary philosophy for Mexico because of its emphasis on peasants as a revolutionary class. Among the first rural movements in Mexico to embrace the teachings of Mao, as well as those of Ho Chi Minh, were those that splintered off from the hybrid agrarian-proletarian Jaramillista movement after the death of its leader Rubén Jaramillo, who had fought under Emiliano Zapata during the revolution.<sup>68</sup> The Spartacus Communist League, particularly its rural cadres in the states of Morelos and Guerrero, emerged from a mixture of this radicalized offshoot of Jaramillo’s agrarismo and urban activists who had participated in the 1968 mobilizations. The agrarian faction of the Spartacus movement into which Ulloa entered, effectively became a separate organization after the post-68 split. The group never adopted new name; it was simply

---

<sup>67</sup> Ulloa, *Sendero*, 108.

<sup>68</sup> On the Jaramillista movement see Tanalís Padilla, *Rural Resistance in the Land of Zapata: The Jaramillista Movement and the Myth of the Pax Priísta, 1940-1962* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

known as “the Organization.”

Ulloa’s personal devotion to the figure of Mao and his philosophy approached a nearly religious fervor. In his memoir he recalls—sardonically and self-critically—that on one of his bedroom walls he had arranged “a gallery of portraits of Mao Tsé-Tung taken from Chinese magazines, in which the personage appeared as a young student; leading the Long March; constructing the Red Army in Yenán; being applauded by thousands of Red Guards on the tribune at Tiananmen—in short, displaying a cult of personality.” He recalls turning red with embarrassment when a member of the Organization visited Ulloa’s home and, upon seeing the wall, knelt down in front of the portraits and crossed himself. Despite having realized “his error”, Ulloa writes, he did not immediately take the pictures down. “In truth I liked looking at them and I couldn’t imagine the naked wall without the presence of the Great Timonel, the Red Sun of our hearts, leading us in successive waves of masses towards the triumph of socialism and communism in Mexico and the rest of the world, like in that beautiful painting by Augusto Ramírez (the famous *Zum*).”<sup>69</sup>

The older Ulloa remarks many times throughout his memoir that in his youth he desperately wished to be closer to *el pueblo*, to find *el pueblo*, to be of and with it. Yet his fascination with what he later admits was a reified and fetishized notion of the people, was not simply a result of his Maoist principles. Rather, the want of proximity is foremost a reflection of the distance and distinction, geographic as much as cultural, separating him from Mexico’s “masses,” its peasants and urban workers. Mexican society is starkly stratified along class lines, and Mexicans of all classes are often highly class-conscious, reading, expressing, and performing class distinctions, which are coded in densely layered cultural practices and signs, such as speech, dress, or skin color. We cannot over-generalize, yet it is certainly common for upper-class Mexicans to be brought up to be highly conscious of “their class,” and to be disdainful of those who

---

<sup>69</sup> Ulloa, Sendero, 63.

are of a lower class. On the other hand, markers of upper-class distinction were also taken as markers of a bourgeois society, which revolutionaries (and would-be revolutionaries) in the 1960s allegedly sought to destroy. Therefore, it was understandably challenging for Ulloa—with his pale skin, his private-school education, and his home in an affluent borough—to integrate and ingratiate himself among peasants and workers in a *movimiento de masas*, organized around an ideology that spurned and sought to destroy bourgeois society.<sup>70</sup>

The irony in Ulloa's quixotic quest to be close to *el pueblo* is further compounded by the frank derision, a thinly veiled racism, with which he writes about prison guards, soldiers, and other lower-class individuals. He acknowledges the romanticism in his view of workers and peasants, yet he seems oblivious to the racialized, at times racist, way in which he portrays certain lower-class individuals, namely, soldiers, police, prison guards. These seem to stand outside of Ulloa's conception of "the people," despite the fact that they could easily be cousins or neighbors of the workers and peasants whom he sought to free from discrimination and exploitation. Moreover, such derision does not seem to stem simply from the fact that guards and soldiers were his tormentors. That is, he does not uniformly treat all of his tormentors in such a way. Despite his disdain for the prosecutor who interrogates him, for instance, he nonetheless describes him as a refined gentleman, as opposed to the ugly, stinky, uncouth, uneducated cops who interrogate him. The irony is compounded no less by his treatment of his wife and daughter whom, by his own admission, he ignored and imperiled.

---

<sup>70</sup> It is possible, one could argue, that in trying to overcome distinction Ulloa heightened his own awareness of it. Rather than overcompensating in hopes of climbing socially, Ulloa may have done so in trying to climb down, so to speak, inverting the sorts of class performances analyzed by Labov and Bourdieu. See Pierre Bourdieu, *A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984); William Labov, "On the Mechanism of Linguistic Change," in *Directions in Sociolinguistics: The Ethnography of Communication*, ed. John Gumperz and Dell Hymes (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), 512–38.



*That in March of 1973 Dionisio introduced Ulloa to two individuals whom he had never met, who went under the aliases of “Miguel” and “Gorgonio.” He later discovered that “Miguel” was Lucio Cabañas Barrientos; he never learned Gorgonio’s name, though he appeared to be close to Cabañas Barrientos.*

*That by “Dionisio’s” instructions, Ulloa served as Lucio Cabañas’ chauffeur, driving him on two occasions to Ciudad Hidalgo, Michoacán, where they came to the house of a woman whom Ulloa did not know, whose address he cannot recall, though he could find it again if this were necessary. A teacher, whose name he also does not recall, would come to this house in order to meet with Lucio Cabañas, as she appeared to be his girlfriend or lover. On these trips Cabañas Barrientos would remain in Ciudad Hidalgo for approximately one day, which he would spend with the aforementioned teacher and conversing with the owner of the house. Ulloa would then bring him back to Mexico City, dropping him off on Avenida Ferrocarril, near the entrance to the colonia Gabriel Hernández, next to an asbestos and construction store, where he would pick up Lucio Cabañas and “Gorgonio.”*

*That he also drove the two of them to the city of Durango, where Lucio Cabañas met with some teachers, one named S. and the other M.. They would meet at the home of S., which was relatively close to the train station; and though he cannot recall the address of said house, he could find it again and point it out if it were necessary. Ulloa realized that Cabañas and S. were clearly friends who had known each other for a long time, and shared ideological sensibilities. That Montoya came to this house in order to speak with Cabañas about topics that were evidently revolutionary, yet which Ulloa did not overhear since they spoke in private. He later found out that these teachers are well known in Durango on account of their participation in the disturbances that have occurred there, and that they had contacted them in order them to send weapons and munitions to Lucio Cabañas. They remained in said house for two nights and a day before returning to Mexico City. That the aforementioned trips to Michoacán and Durango were made*

*aboard a bottle-green 1971 Volkswagen, with Mexico City license plates, number 694-BCL, belonging to the testifier.*

The fact that Ulloa owned a car, paired with his impulsive willingness to do as The Organization dictated, proved to be crucial determinants in the particular course that his political ventures took. As he indicates in his memoir, it was his car and his services as chauffeur and courier that made him vital to the Organization. It was because he drove Cabañas to and from across Mexico that he became a key informer for the government. It was in his car that he was arrested. And it was on account of the contents of the car—Cabañas' cassette recordings and the Chinese pamphlets—that he was arrested.

We can infer from these trips that Ulloa relates, that Cabañas had access to an extensive network of fellow teachers and revolutionaries, united not only by ideological affinities, but by shared experience. It is likely that many of Cabañas' connections were accrued during his tenure as national president of the Federation of Socialist Peasant Students, when he was a student in Ayotzinapa. The Durango connection, however, was likely forged in the mid-sixties, when the state government in Guerrero expelled Cabañas and another teacher, transferring them to teaching positions in Durango. The transfer did little to pacify them, however, as they immediately set about organizing women and school-parents into militant collectives.<sup>71</sup>

*That “Javier” and Ulloa agreed to inform Lucio Cabañas and then meet in the same place the following day. When Ulloa told Cabañas, the latter authorized him to go to the agreed location, receive the money from “Oscar,” and bring it back to Ulloa’s home. Ulloa followed these instructions, and when he*

---

<sup>71</sup> This feat attests to Cabañas' extraordinary skills as a political organizer, when one considers the speed with which they accomplished this in a place where they arrived as strangers. It also attests to the important social position that schoolteachers had, and continue having, in many parts of rural Mexico, where they are often adopted by community as leaders, on account of their education and their capacity to advocate for the community before the state. In this respect, there are striking similarities between the schoolteachers of the twentieth century and colonial parish priests during the colonial period in New Spain (an exploration of the question is tempting, but beyond the purview of this chapter).

*had the money in his hands, he told “Oscar” that that they would convene in that same location three hours later. Lucio would then tell Ulloa whether he wanted to meet with “Oscar,” which he did, therefore, Ulloa picked up “Oscar” and brought him back to his home. There they counted the money amongst Lucio Cabañas, “Dionisio,” “Oscar,” and Ulloa. The sum of the stolen money had ascended to around one million seven hundred thousand pesos, which was divided into three packages: two packages of seven hundred thousand pesos and one of three hundred thousand. “Isauro” was given one of the big packages, as well as the smaller one, the first of which he would hide, and the second would be destined for the Organization, which he and “Dionisio” directed. “Dionisio” was entrusted with the second of the larger sums, which he was to hide and eventually deliver to Cabañas in the sierra of Guerrero. After counting and dividing the money, Ulloa dropped off “Oscar” at the site where he had picked him up, without noticing what direction he went in.*

That several days later, in mid to late April, Lucio Cabañas stated his intentions to leave the testifier’s house and head back to the sierra in Guerrero to prepare for the third assembly of the Party of the Poor. Ulloa therefore took Cabañas in his car to a gas station near Fray Servando and Jenaro García streets, where Cabañas got into “Dionisio’s” red Volkswagen, aboard which he apparently made the trip to Guerrero.

*That on the thirteenth or fourteenth of May “Dionsio” informed Ulloa that Lucio Cabañas had invited them to the third reunion of the Party of the Poor, which took place from the eighteenth to the twentieth of that month in the sierra around the community of El Ciruelar, in the vicinity of Atoyac de Álvarez. Ulloa went to the reunion accompanied by “Dionisio,” “Guillermo” and “Ricardo,” which were the pseudonyms of two campesinos from Huacalco and San Nicolás Tolentino, Morelos. At the reunion the testifier saw “Marcos,” who was a member of M.A.R. [Movimiento Acción Revolucionaria], as well as J.G.G of the Brigada [Campesina] de Ajusticiamiento of the Party of the Poor, and N.B.B. of Unión del*

*Pueblo, among others.*

*That over the course of the discussions that took place there, the following obligatory agreements were set forth for members of the Party of the Poor: First, to carry out and increase the number of attacks on the [Mexican] armed forces, in order to decimate its repressive capacities and acquire weapons for the Party of the Poor. Second, to carry out robberies and kidnappings against banking institutions and important members of the bourgeoisie, in order to acquire monetary funds to sustain and expand the guerrilla actions of the Party of the Poor. Third, to increase the ideological and informational propaganda about the goals and actions of the Party of the Poor. Fourth, to make a call to all revolutionary organizations [in Mexico] to strive to connect themselves with the needs of el pueblo. And fifth, to propose the need for all “nucleos revolucionarios” to engage in a thorough study of Mexican History, as a prerequisite for understanding political and economic phenomena in Mexico and carrying out further revolutionary actions.*

Mexican historian Armando Bartra has argued that the armed uprisings in Guerrero in the sixties and seventies were undoubtedly influenced by the Cuban foquista model in vogue, but that that this influence “does not go beyond select organizational recipes and numerous verbal formulas. In Guerrero, popular counter-violence, as a response to repression, was not a voluntary invention of vanguard leaders, but, rather, a social reflex with deep historical roots.”<sup>72</sup> Organic intellectuals and radicals, from Cabañas to the EZLN’s subcomandante Marcos, have tended to invoke Mexican history, citing figures such as Morelos, Guerrero, Zapata, Magón, or Jaramillo as their main influences. As Blacker-Hansen notes in a recent article, it was the legacy and language of the 1910 revolution that inspired and gave meaning to popular movements

---

<sup>72</sup> Armando Bartra, *Guerrero bronco : campesinos, ciudadanos y guerrilleros en la Costa Grande* (Tepepan, México, D.F.: Ediciones sinfiltro, 1996), 108.

in rural Mexico during the Cold War, more so than Cuban-style cosmopolitanism.<sup>73</sup> Cabañas was certainly influenced by the Cuban revolution, from which he drew inspiration for his own *foquista* model of guerrilla warfare. Like thousands of leftists in rural villages and urban centers across Latin America, Cabañas was listening to the speeches of Fidel Castro, catching the signal from Havana over shortwave radio. However, as Blacker persuasively demonstrates, the ideals and discourses of the Mexican revolution dwarfed those of the Cuban revolution in the utopian imaginary of Mexican activists.

Cabañas was indeed well versed in the language of Mexican revolutionary nationalism, a discourse and ideology that first took hold in rural Mexico thanks to the work of rural teachers—the heirs of colonial missionaries, as Octavio Paz referred to them—who proselytized the new “national culture” born of the Mexican revolution during the “socialist education” campaign in the 1930s. Rural teachers, which Octavio Paz has called the heirs of colonial New Spain’s missionaries, were sent out to achieve a “second conquest” of the Indians and peasants whose cultural backwardness had to be overcome in order to bring them the benefits of the Revolution.<sup>74</sup> In this educational campaign, *normales rurales*, teachers schools were established in many parts of Mexico, such as Ayotzinapa, Guerrero, where Cabañas and Vasquez, and generations of subsequent rebels, were trained as teachers. It is one of the most notable ironies of Mexico’s political history during the twentieth century, that the institutions meant to produce teachers, handmaidens of the state in the decades immediately after the revolution, would by mid-century produce its most vocal and radical critics. The most significant guerrilla movements in Mexico during the sixties and seventies, such as those in the states of Guerrero and Chihuahua, were all led by schoolteachers.

---

<sup>73</sup> See Blacker, “Cold War in the Countryside: Conflict in Guerrero, Mexico.” On the other hand, Cabañas was undoubtedly influenced by the Cuban revolution, from which he derived his own *foquista* model of guerrilla warfare. Like thousands of leftists in rural villages and urban centers across Latin America, Cabañas was listening to the speeches of Fidel Castro, which they heard over short wave radios that caught the signal from Havana.

<sup>74</sup> Octavio Paz, *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, o, Las trampas de la fe* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1982); Claudio Lomnitz-Adler, *Death and the Idea of Mexico* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Zone Books; Cambridge, Mass.: Distributed by MIT Press, 2005); Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution*.

By framing the struggle of the Party of the Poor as a continuation of the struggles begun during the revolution—as one to recover the “interrupted” national revolution—Cabañas was effectively able to give his movement a national resonance that would have been unimaginable before the revolution. The neo-Zapatistas’ call for “national liberation” in subsequent decades would have an explosive resonance, even beyond Mexico’s borders, which would dwarf the fame garnered by Cabañas.

On the other hand, Cabañas did not only subvert revolutionary nationalism, wresting it from the mouths and symbols of the state. He also infused it with dense layers of local and personal history, which partly accounts for the tremendous popularity that he and his movement gained among large portions of the rural populace of the Costa Grande—the *campesinos*, coffee growers, itinerant workers, teachers and students, who constituted the bulk of the Party of the Poor. The grandparents of many of Cabañas’ young guerrilleros had themselves taken up arms in the 1910 revolution—Cabañas’ own grandfather, Pablo Cabañas, was a general in Emiliano Zapata’s Ejército Libertador del Sur. More recently, in the 1950s and 1960s Guerrero had become the stage for a series of political upheavals and large popular mobilizations, such as the broad “anti-Aburto” coalition that succeeded in deposing the unpopular governor, Raúl Caballero Aburto in 1960, powerful coalitions of copra and coffee producers, or the Asociación Cívica Guerrerense (renamed Asociación Cívica Nacional Revolucionaria in 1967), which was led by Genaro Vasquez Rojas, Guerrero’s other schoolteacher-guerrilla leader.<sup>75</sup> These and other political movements in the 1950s and 60s managed to rally multitudinous crowds, particularly in cities such as Chilpancingo and Acapulco, and smaller towns that were deeply connected to rural areas, such as Atoyac. However, in spite of such a muscular and dynamic culture of civic politics, political and economic power and institutions in Guerrero remained acutely undemocratic, even by Mexican standards.

---

<sup>75</sup> Much like Cabañas, Vasquez Rojas was also a schoolteacher deeply steeped in politics, who turned to armed rebellion in the late 1960s, after years of organizing civic protests and unsuccessfully running for public office, only to be confronted time and again by the deeply-entrenched political and military force of the PRI and local caciques.

The appeal of the Party of the Poor drew on the lived experience of decades of struggles: the student movement, electoral and non-electoral movements struggling against the entrenched nepotism of local *caciques*, rural opposition to timber companies, demands for rural investment and government programs, among other others. The unfulfilled or unraveling accomplishments of the revolution, the progress, development, and prosperity so present in the PRI's discourse yet so absent in rural Guerrero, the stranglehold of *caciques* over agriculture, industry, and formal politics: these were the realities that led *atoyaquenses* to the Party of the Poor.

*That following the third assembly of the Party of the Poor, Ulloa maintained his contact with Lucio Cabañas, using "Gorgonio" as an intermediary. In this way Ulloa was able to send Lucio Cabañas the arms they had acquired from the teachers in Durango. He received the first shipment of these in July 1973, which consisted of a M-1 carbine, a M-2, a 7mm. Magnum rifle with a telescopic sight, two Super 38 pistols, and ammunitions for all of these, the quantity of which he cannot recall. Ulloa received these arms from Professor M. at a spot on the Mexico-Pachuca highway, near the airbase at Santa Lucia. He then drove these in his car to Acapulco, where he gave them to "Gorgonio" to give to Cabañas, following the same procedure with a second shipment of weapons in the month of November.*

*That in August of 1974 "Dionisio" instructed Ulloa to drive to Chihuahua city [in northern Mexico] with "Jacobo," a member of the M.A.R. [urban guerrilla organization]. They drove in the testifier's car, taking a M-1 carbine that "Jacobo" had acquired from "Dionisio," though the testifier does not know who "Dionisio" obtained it from, nor whom "Jacobo" gave it to in Chihuahua.*

*That Ulloa and "Jacobo" remained in contact, meeting up in Mexico City on September 4 of this year at the San Lázaro metro station, from which they set out to visit a plot of land in a place called Tlaltizapán, in the state of Morelos. The point of this trip was to give "Jacobo" a demonstration of the sort of work that the Organization was doing and to discuss and compare the different experiences of the*

*Organization and the M.A.R., to learn from each other's mistakes and successes. Inside the testifier's car were three audio cassettes that contained recordings of conversations between Lucio Cabañas and campesinos in the Guerrero sierra. These were recorded in April and given to Ulloa by "Gorgonio" in May, when they exchanged the last two carbines, which Ulloa had kept in his house because the last shipment was too bulky to travel with.*

*When they were arrested at the aforementioned plot of land in Tlaltizapán, Ulloa's and "Plutarco's" cars were confiscated ["les fueron recogidos los automóviles"]—the former of which is described earlier, and the second of which was also a blue 1972 Volkswagen, though he cannot recall the license plate number. The testifier wishes to note that during throughout the period of his militancy and participation in the revolutionary activities described in this act, he has gone by the aliases of "Julian," "Fausto," and "Nicolás."*

And there the document ends—though it is also, in a sense, where it begins, for it was at this point, Ulloa's arrest in Tlaltizapán, that he was taken to the clandestine military prison where, after being disappeared, isolated, and tortured, he was visited by the bureaucrat who recorded his testimony. Ulloa spent just over two months in the subsoil of Campo Militar Número Uno. After giving the testimony that would result in the document we read above, Ulloa was then transferred to Lecumberri Prison, the "Black Palace," where he would be imprisoned for nearly two years, before being moved to lower-level prisons and finally freed in 1978.

### **The Rehabilitated Prison, The Resurrected Archive**

*On the many occasions that I passed in front of Lecumberri after October 2, 1968, I was never able to stop thinking about the students and the teachers imprisoned there, unable to stop telling myself that*



*before long before I too would be locked up in that dungeon [mazmorra]... But the reality of the Black Palace of Lecumberri was always far more terrible than the worst of nightmares.*<sup>76</sup>

On 14 November 1974 Alberto Ulloa Bornemann's remembered prophecy would be realized as he passed in front of Lecumberri prison once more, this time aboard the *julia* [police car] that would leave him inside the gates of the Black Palace. Ulloa, who was charged with robbing a bank and being a member of a guerrilla organization, would spend the next four years in Lecumberri, before being liberated under the 1978 Amnesty Law, which freed all political prisoners who had been incarcerated during the dirty war.<sup>77</sup> The former revolutionary was promptly given a job in a newly formed department of the federal government, following the common practice of rehabilitating political prisoners by incorporating them into the ranks of the government that had locked them away. Just one year later a presidential decree by the government of José López Portillo terminated Lecumberri's functions as a penitentiary: the panopticon structure would be renovated and turned into the new vessel for the Archivo General de la Nación. Like Ulloa, the Black Palace of Lecumberri too was rehabilitated by the state, which magnanimously released them both from the carceral world and brought them into the world of state bureaucracy.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, Lecumberri would once again become entangled with the legacy of the dirty war when the government of Vicente Fox began declassifying the archival records of defunct state security agencies and moving them to the National Archive (AGN).<sup>78</sup> Thirty years after he first entered the Black Palace, Ulloa Bornemann would thus enter Lecumberri once again, this time in order to view the declassified documents in his dossier. Together with what memories he held of his time as a

---

<sup>76</sup> Ulloa, *Sendero*, 183.

<sup>77</sup> The government of president José López Portillo (1976-1982) passed the Amnesty Law on 28 September 1978, granting freedom to those who were incarcerated for their participation in social and political movements, including the student movement of 1968, guerrilla organizations, and various labor and peasant movements. That same year, López Portillo's government also reformed the electoral system in order to allow leftist political parties to run for office.

<sup>78</sup> The Dirección Federal de Seguridad (DFS) and Dirección General de Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales (DGIPS) collections are now housed in Galeria 1 of the National Archive (Archivo General de la Nación, AGN).

revolutionary and as political prisoner, these documents became the basis for the memoir he published in 2004.

Around the same time that Ulloa was retracing his steps through the halls of Lecumberri, a group of Mexican researchers known as FEMOSPP also began investigating the newly opened files as part of a special commission of the Attorney General's Office (Procuraduría General de la República, PGR) charged with investigating state crimes against social movements since the 1960s.<sup>79</sup> Though Ulloa was in no way involved in the work of the FEMOSPP commission, his memoir nonetheless became a key source in the commission's final report.<sup>80</sup>

In the summer of 2009 I too retraced Ulloa's footsteps through the halls of Lecumberri, though I was unaware of this at the time, as I began my search through the secret police records pertaining to the Party of the Poor. As I sifted through the enormous stacks of papers comprising Cabañas' personal dossier, I stumbled upon the testimony that one Alberto Ulloa Bornemann gave before a fine-moustachioed prosecutor in 1974, one day before arriving at Lecumberri, where I now sat reading.

The Black Palace of Lecumberri, *el Palacio Negro*, was built on the outskirts of Mexico City at the end of the nineteenth century under the old dictator, Porfirio Díaz. The halls and cells where once prisoners and rats ambulated, toiled and slept, are today populated by bureaucrats, secretaries, archivists, students, researchers and unimaginable quantities of paper. The only figures that remain from the past are the guards. From the ceiling of the enormous vaulted center of the spider-shaped prison/archive hangs a gargantuan Mexican flag, the grandest of countless nationalist symbols—flags, busts, slogans, models, paintings—

---

<sup>79</sup> The Special Commission on Social and Political Movements of the Past (Fiscalía Especial para Movimientos Sociales y Políticos del Pasado, FEMOSPP) was created by the Fox administration in 2001. See Montemayor, *La guerrilla recurrente*.

<sup>80</sup> The FEMOSPP was unceremoniously liquidated in 2006 by the PGR, which claimed that the commission had fulfilled its task, although the commission had not yet published its final report or succeeded in indicting any functionaries responsible for the crimes documented within it. However, an incomplete draft of the enormous report was leaked to the National Security Archive in Washington D.C., which published it in its entirety. See Sotelo, "Informe Histórico a La Sociedad Mexicana."

scattered throughout exhibition rooms, hallways, offices, desks and bathrooms. Outside, the street is all speeding minibuses, trucks, cars and smoke, green cabs and cops speeding to and from the bustling hub of San Lázaro *metro* station, where Ulloa picked up “Jacobó” in his blue Volkswagen beetle on the day they were arrested.

## Conclusion

*Speak, documents.* This play on the title of Nabokov’s memoir encapsulates the spirit of the present chapter—an essay about getting documents to speak. I contend that Alberto Ulloa’s *declaración* can be read in multiple ways, including ethnographically, in similar ways to how one might read an oral history. The testimony that he gave before the prosecutor was, in fact, a kind of perverse oral history—one composed, foremost, in the interests of police intelligence and counterinsurgency, yet one that nonetheless contains a wealth of “excess” information and traces of the imprisoned voice behind it. Read alongside Ulloa’s memoir, his *declaración* provides a surprisingly eloquent and intimate portrait of a man who was deeply involved in some of the most important political upheavals in mid-twentieth century Mexico.

As Jean Hébrard has written, for many historians, personal writings, such as memoirs—and we might add legal documents, such as interrogations and confessions—are primarily of value as testimony.<sup>81</sup> Indeed, throughout this essay I have attempted to show that the *declaración* given by Alberto Ulloa Bornemann to a Mexican prosecutor in 1974 serves as a tremendously rich testimonial source. However, following Hébrard, this essay attempts to go beyond reading the *declaración* or the memoir solely as testimony, by viewing these texts as *objects*. What this essay tries to show, which the memoir alone could not, is the extent to which the *declaración*, the memoir, and the work of prosecuting historians are

---

<sup>81</sup> Hébrard, “The writings of Moïse,” 264-65.

palimpsests. They each bear traces of previous iterations of the stories and elements running through them, they index each other's biographies, and each reveals the echo of Ulloa's words as he sat terrorized, *desaparecido*, confessing in an underground prison.

The goal of this essay has not been simply to use Alberto Ulloa's memoir in order to expose the faults of the Public Prosecutor's *declaración* or the unspeakable violence that allowed it to come into existence. Though I have attempted to read the *declaración* "against the grain" in order to extract information from it and reveal the hidden presence of the interrogator, I have attempted to read *along* its archival grain as well, in order to make sense of the various archives, projects, and logics that it has been a part of. Yet the task is complicated by the fact that, as noted, the *declaración* pertains to not one archive, but two. As an element among the records of the Dirección Federal de Seguridad, it served the purpose of collecting information about Ulloa's family, *compañeros*, and acquaintances, as a means of exposing, dismantling, and destroying the movement led by Lucio Cabañas. At the same time the *declaración* served to occlude the government's flagrantly violent and illegal practices of counterinsurgency, which it did by creating a paper veil of legality and formality. However, three decades later, the DFS files would come to constitute a *new archive*—one undergoing an ontological and political transformation—when they were moved to Lecumberri and made available to the public. These paper tools of the state were thus resurrected by the FEMOSPP commission, by victims of the dirty war, by people whose relatives remain disappeared, who reclaimed these documents in order to revise, rewrite, and (re-)make history.

Much in the same way that bureaucrats and police agents once used these documents to expose radical organizations and (in the best of cases) prosecute them, so too did the FEMOSPP researchers attempt to use those same documents to expose and prosecute the state. The FEMOSPP commission ultimately failed to generate any sort of legal action against any of the perpetrators of the crimes it investigated, yet it reintroduced the topic of the dirty war back into national consciousness. Moreover, the commission's

thwarted project has been followed by a proliferation of activists and researchers who are committed to rewriting the story of social movements and state repression in Mexico during the last half-century. The voluminous draft of the unpublished FEMOSPP report has also proven to be a valuable source for much of the recent historical literature on the dirty war.

Audre Lorde has written that the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. Indeed, no Mexican military or government official has ever been brought to trial for their involvement in the dirty war. Yet we may take on the more modest task, as I have attempted to do in this essay, of interrogating the particular tools and asking what they might tell us about how the master fashioned them, and how they were later turned against the master, even if they could not dismantle his house.

-\*-

## Chapter 2. From the Barricades

*PROTECT US*

*HOLIEST*

*VIRGIN OF THE BARRIKADES*<sup>82</sup>



Figure 3. La Virgen de las Barrikadas (“The Virgin of the Barricades”)<sup>83</sup>

<sup>82</sup> “Barrikades” [*sic*] is intentionally misspelled to reflect the original Spanish. Young people in Oaxaca and other parts of Mexico frequently write “k” in the place of “c” or “qu,” denoting playfulness, informality and disregard for standard spelling conventions.

<sup>83</sup> The Virgin of the Barricades emerged as a popular image during the 2006 uprising in Oaxaca: first, as a graffiti stencil on the streets of the city and in papier mâché effigies at marches and protests. Later, her image could be seen adorning t-shirts and other commodified forms of political art, as well as decking the halls of the internet and certain theses, among other places.

## Oaxacan Social Dramas

In May 2006, more than seventy thousand teachers in Section 22 of the national teachers union (Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación, SNTE) went on strike and occupied the Zócalo in downtown Oaxaca City. This was not out of the ordinary: Every spring since May 1980, Section 22 has gone on strike and occupied the Zócalo after presenting the state government with a series of demands (*pliego petitorio*). These have typically included wages increases and higher allocations of state funds towards education and the union, among a longer list of additional “economic,” “social” and “political demands,” reflecting the various intersecting priorities, commitments, and tendencies within the union bases and the leadership. Since 1980, the teachers’ list of demands has consistently included the release of “all political prisoners”—although the specific prisoners in question have changed over the years—reflecting the consistent use of prisons and judicial institutions as a means of suppressing political opposition, particularly under successive PRI governments throughout much of the twentieth century.<sup>84</sup> Its inclusion on these lists of demands also reflects a discursive shift, beginning in the early 1970s, when the Mexican left increasingly turned to new discourses of Human Rights in order to frame their demand that the Echeverría government (1970-1978) free hundreds of political prisoners from the 1968 student movement and numerous revolutionary organizations that proliferated in the 1970s. By the 1980s, the call to free the prisoners had become a demand *de rigor* for many leftist movements, such as the Oaxacan teachers movement; by 2006, it was perennially in the air, though seldom at the center of the negotiating table when it came time to decide whether to lift the yearly strike.<sup>85</sup>

---

<sup>84</sup> Other parties, once in power, have employed similar tactics since the 1990s when the PRI began to cede a growing number of state governments to the PAN and PRD, and eventually the federal government to the PAN in 2000.

<sup>85</sup> On the origins of the Democratic Teachers’ Union in Mexico and the political context surrounding the emergence of Oaxaca’s union local and its early demands, see Maria Lorena Cook, *Organizing Dissent: Unions, the State, and the Democratic Teachers’ Movement in Mexico* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996).

The teachers thus went on strike in 2006, as they had for twenty-seven years in a row, setting up a *plantón* in the *Zócalo*, generating a now seasonal disruption of daily life around the city center for weeks and sometimes months, lifting it only once union leaders had negotiated a settlement with the government in turn and consulted the rank-and-file in assemblies. These negotiations proceeded differently with the recently elected PRI governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz (2004-2010), an already unpopular governor one year into his administration that a growing chorus of critics denounced as authoritarian and corrupt, on a scale far surpassing that of preceding PRI governors, José Murat Casab (1998-2004) and Diódoro Carrasco Altamirano (1992-1998). Ruiz vowed to show protestors, and especially the teachers with their yearly *plantón*, “a firmer hand” (*la mano dura*) than his predecessors. Thus when the teachers called the strike in 2006, the Ruiz government offered minimal concessions and an ultimatum to the *plantonistas* to evacuate the *Zócalo* or be forcefully evicted by the police. An impasse prevailed until June 14, when hundreds of state police attacked the sleeping teachers before dawn, shooting at the sleeping teachers, who far outnumbered the police, and releasing copious amounts of tear gas through the colonial facades of the city center, which wafted into homes, hotels and businesses for several blocks around the plaza. The teachers, whose numbers quickly swelled with thousands of reinforcements throughout the morning, armed themselves with rocks, sticks, and bottles. After several hours of street fighting, the teachers successfully repelled the police, who were forced to retreat, both sides having sustained many injuries, as the inhabitants of the city awoke to discover that the streets of the Centro had become a war zone.<sup>86</sup>

Three days after this confrontation on the *Zócalo*, which quickly became memorialized as “the battle of June fourteenth,” Section 22 leaders called for a massive assembly of organizations and collectives beyond the ranks of the teachers to protest the governor’s actions. The massive turnout for the assembly

---

<sup>86</sup> Víctor Raúl Martínez Vásquez, *Autoritarismo, movimiento popular y crisis política: Oaxaca 2006* (Oaxaca: Universidad Autónoma Benito Juárez de Oaxaca, 2007).



surprised even its organizers: hundreds of organizations and thousands of Oaxacans with and without formal political affiliation joined the newly formed Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (*Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca*, APPO). Over the following several months the APPO movement would experiment with various practices of radical direct democracy; yet its central demand, from its inception, was the removal from office and prosecution of Governor Ulises Ruiz.

A similar coalition of Oaxacan social movements had successfully removed a sitting governor in 1977, and several participants in that earlier movement later joined the APPO, while many others held memories of these events.<sup>87</sup> Over the following months, the ouster of Ulises Ruiz seemed distinctly within the realm of the possible. Ultimately, however, Ruiz finished his term as governor due to a variety of factors, including the massive police and military operation, which led to the wholesale violent suppression of this movement after November 2006. The entrance of federal forces was the result a negotiated settlement between the PRI and PAN, by which the PRI would support the PAN's candidate, Felipe Calderón (2006-2012), allowing him to become president, following a fiercely disputed and controversial national election, which the center-left candidate, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, also claimed to win, ushering several months of protests in the nation's capital. In exchange for the PRI's support of a Calderón victory, the PAN government of then president Vicente Fox (2000-2006) agreed to send what amounted to an invading army of federal forces to Oaxaca, propping up Ruiz's government with brute force.

In its initial phases, the outpouring of support for the aggrieved teachers from other organizations and groups was surprising to many Oaxacans, many of whom typically resented the teachers' annual *plantones*, which left their children without classes, generating severe traffic throughout the city and making

---

<sup>87</sup> The ousted governor, Manuel Zárate Aquino, was replaced an army general, Eliseo Jiménez Ruiz, who had overseen the successful military campaign against the guerrilla army of the Party of the Poor (PDLP) led by Lucio Cabañas in the state of Guerrero. As governor, Jiménez persecuted various leftist social movements and effectively dismantled the *Unión del Pueblo* guerrilla organization, whose surviving members later joined those of the PDLP to form PROCUP-PDLP and then the EPR. See Stephen, *We Are the Face of Oaxaca*, 56–58; Castellanos and Jiménez Martín del Campo, *México Armado 1943-1981*.

the Zócalo, though not inaccessible, congested and effectively unusable as a popular thoroughfare and tourist attraction. Yet more than a show of support for Section 22, the APPO was an indicator of widespread resentment towards the PRI, which had held power in the state since the 1930s, and particularly towards its governor, who in the following months would earn the nickname, “the Butcher of Oaxaca,” on account of the death squads he is said to have organized to attack APPO protestors, leading to the proliferation of barricades at various points throughout the city.

Among the first organizations to join the APPO were many that had suffered some form of repression under the current governor and several other workers unions.<sup>88</sup> These were joined by various human rights organizations and groups advocating for a vast range of issues, from gender equality, to the preservation of historical buildings, to the liberation of political prisoners. Indigenous organizations whose base of support was outside Oaxaca City did not immediately join the APPO, but several eventually joined. The APPO also spawned new organizations, such as the Oaxaca Women’s Council (Coordinadora de Mujeres de Oaxaca), who occupied the state-run television station (COR-TV), opening the cameras and microphones to women’s testimonies and their reflections on the current state of things in the city, in the state, and in the country. Víctor Raúl Martínez Vásquez, a sociologist who participated in some capacity in the Oaxacan social movements of the 1970s and in 2006, would later write that the APPO’s heterogeneous composition was “reflected in its organization, goals, and even in its actions. It even embodies historical junctions of other popular struggles, such as the old cadres of the Revolutionary Teachers Movement... the 1968 student movement, the student-popular alliance of 1977, which helped to oust then governor Manuel

---

<sup>88</sup> Among the group of organizations that had suffered some form of repression, such as political assassinations, arrests, imprisonment, harassment and threats, under Ruiz’s government were the following: el Frente Amplio de Lucha Popular (FALP), el Consejo Indígena Popular de Oaxaca – Ricardo Flores Magón (CIPO-RFM), la Organización Indígena de Derechos Humanos de Oaxaca (OIDHO), el Comité Democrático Ciudadano (CODECI), el Consejo de Defensa del Pueblo (CODEP), la Organización de Pueblos Indígenas Zapoteca (OPIZ), the “Popular” municipal council of (*Ayuntamiento Popular*) San Blas Atempa, and Nueva Izquierda de Oaxaca. See Martínez Vásquez, *Autoritarismo, movimiento popular y crisis política*; Stephen, *We Are the Face of Oaxaca*, 56–58.

Zárate Aquino, as well as the so-called new social movements for human rights, environmental advocacy, gender equality, indigenous autonomy, and grassroots Catholic associations.”<sup>89</sup>

The APPO movement formed precipitously in June 2006. Within days of “the battle of June fourteenth,” thousands of people and hundreds of organizations had joined the APPO, demanding the expulsion of the state governor. Over the following months, participants in APPO occupied numerous government offices, public spaces, and radio and television stations, repurposing them to various ends. *Appistas* also barricaded streets, organized “mega-marches” that repeatedly brought tens of thousands of supporters onto the streets, and assemblies, councils and forums, where they experimented with more inclusive and participatory models of politics.

The uprising impacted the daily lives of Oaxacans in the state capital and throughout much of the state, especially in the nearby towns of the Central Valleys and Sierra Juárez, but also as far away as the Mixteca Alta in the western part of the state and the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in the east. The tourism industry withered for months, taking several years to recover, and causing a significant economic downturn for the state. Parts of the city’s historic center and state university came to look like war zones yet again, as heavily armored federal police and marines wrested control of the city from the APPO. The days of street fighting and house raids that followed, in late 2006 and early 2007, left indelible marks on the memories of many Oaxacans. They were followed by “days of silence,” as several witnesses described them, amidst a surge of desperate search efforts in the pacified city to find missing persons: in the various overflowing jails, at the barracks, in the hospitals, and in some cases, the morgue. The APPO’s failure to remove Ulises Ruiz from office compounded a political hangover Oaxaca, amidst efforts to revive the APPO.

At least twenty-three people died between June and December of 2006, and hundreds more were

---

<sup>89</sup> Martínez Vásquez, *Autoritarismo, movimiento popular y crisis política*, 82.

detained and imprisoned. The scale of violence gradually decreased in the city throughout early 2007, as the movement was quelled and the state government restored, although the persecution of APPO members and persistent human rights violations continued to take place throughout the remainder of Ruiz's term. This trend continued largely unabated, even after the PRI's first historic loss of the governorship in 2010 and the electoral triumph of Gabino Cue Monteagudo's coalition of, both, center-left and center-right political forces. Cue emerged from the PRI, however, and remained part of Diódoro Carrasco's inner circle, whom he worked for when the latter was governor in the late nineties.

Violent repression significantly deflated and fractured the APPO. Nonetheless, 2006 was a watershed moment in the state that significantly impacted the political landscape of the state and its multitude of overlapping social movements. As the movement became recent history, many of those who participated in the barricades, in the assemblies, and in the occupied radio and television stations, continued to invoke these experiences, now in recent memory, as an ideal to return to—a piece of history on which to model the future. Many groups who participated in the 2006 uprising would later continue to claim the APPO mantle, fighting over it occasionally, whilst turning the events of 2006 into an origin story and a key node in their political genealogies. Yet they were unable to regenerate the popular mobilizations and sentiments of the 2006 movement, signaling a transition from insurgency to the evocations and simulations of insurgency, even as these occasionally boiled into actual conflict.

When I began conducting fieldwork in Oaxaca City in the summer of 2008, the effervescence and the afterglow of the momentous 2006 uprising of the Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca (Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca, APPO) were still palpable on the newly occupied streets and the Zócalo of the state capital. In this chapter I draw on my experiences among the (figurative and literal) punks of the APPO and the testimonies and stories they shared with me as the basis for an examination of the

APPO and its aftermath in the years immediately after 2006. Through the stories and experiences of the APPO's punks, anarchists, and *barrikaderxs*—the youths of the barricades—I reflect on the what it meant, and what it feels like, to find oneself in the midst of an insurrection. The sensorial experience of the *plantón* was central to the lived experience of participation in the APPO in 2008, as it had been in the barricades of 2006. Two years after the uprising, young activists were symbolically bringing the barricades to the Zócalo, performing their politics and their memories, and projecting these upon the occupied public space around them, and acting as agents of imagined collectivities far beyond the bounds of their own particular collectives and groups of *compas*, entities such as the APPO, “the peoples of Oaxaca,” or just “the people.” Their acts of rebellion, infused elements of play (*desmadre*), memory, and history into concepts such as *el pueblo*, a term I define more carefully further on. Here, the aesthetics of rebellion become the form as well as the content of collective political action.

For young activists and *barrikaderxs* in the post-APPO movement, as the stories in the second half of this chapter illustrate, insurrection was not an uncomplicatedly *serious* matter. Rebellion was, for these *barrikaderxs*, in certain ways, a form of play—a serious kind of game, or a playful revolution. The journalist Diego Osorno, who accompanied the APPO for a time in 2006, later wrote that many of the “street kids” (*chavos banda*)<sup>90</sup> of the movement were there just for the *desmadre*.<sup>91</sup> While this portrayal dismisses *desmadre* and flattens the identity of the youths at the barricades, Osorno was not entirely off mark: The stories in the second half of this chapter demonstrate that *desmadre*, in the occupied plaza and in the barricades of memory, was more than just *desmadre*: It was, in itself, a kind of politics. The politics of *desmadre* asserted that insurrection *is* a form of play, and that play is an essential ingredient of insurrection.

---

<sup>90</sup> “*Chavos banda*” translates roughly to “street kids;” denoting urban working class youths who hang out in the streets of urban *colonias* (neighborhoods). The term can, in certain contexts, be pejorative or classist. In Osorno’s description it effectively flattens the class and gender heterogeneity of *barrikaderxs*. Diego Enrique Osorno, *Oaxaca Sitiada: la primera insurrección del siglo XXI* (México, D.F.: Grijalbo: Random House Mondadori, 2007).

<sup>91</sup> A distinctly Mexican slang word that can refer to a party, a messy situation, a wild time, or a chaotic situation.

Play as revolutionary form and content. Performing desmadre in the plantón seemed to assert the old anarchist maxim, ascribed to Emma Goldman and prescribed by Subcomandante Marcos in his writings around this time: “If your revolution doesn’t dance, don’t invite me to your revolution.”

I next provide a brief narrative of the APPO rebellion and discussion of its presence on the occupied Zócalo two years later. In order to consider the sensorial and embodied aspects of the experience of being in the occupied plaza, I begin by narrating its negative image: the *absence* of the plantón, as it looked and sounded on the day after the thousands of teachers and Appistas lifted their occupation of the plaza. The material and sensorial traces of absence and silence reveal a negative photograph of the plantón, as a way of highlighting the sensory qualities of the *presence* of the occupation, which I discuss next. I argue that sensory and aesthetic transformations of public space infuse meaning and material specificity into an abstraction such as an occupation of “the people.” The latter part of the chapter is then devoted to the stories of barrikaderxs and young activists at the plantón, revealing what it meant to live in the afterglow of 2006 as well as in its shadow.

## **The Zócalo**

Officially titled the *Plaza de la Constitución*, Oaxaca’s Zócalo consists of a large square plaza with a gazebo and bandstand at its center; its southern edge is flanked by the former government palace; on the east and west sides are the arches, the *portales*, of colonial buildings that now house restaurants, cafes and ice-cream shops; on the northern side is the cathedral, the front of which faces west, towards a small park, the Alameda de León. In colonial Latin American cities civic, political, ecclesiastical, and economic power have traditionally been concentrated in central plazas, such as the Zócalo, making these spaces important sites for the contestation and negotiation of power and its symbols. So too has Oaxaca’s Zócalo been its

symbolic center, its locus of power, and a stage for the contestation of power and its symbols.<sup>92</sup> As such, it remains an obvious stage for the teachers' yearly plantón, and those of many other organizations who regularly occupy the plaza in order to draw attention to their demands or utilize it for its visibility. For instance, women from San Agustín Loxicha maintained an indefinite plantón on the Zócalo from 1997 to 2001, effectively sustaining the ongoing crisis in Loxicha and the prisons in public light for years, as other simultaneous plantones came and went. In the weeks before the Loxicha detentions began in September 1996, thousands of protestors from Loxicha had staged a plantón to demand basic services and infrastructure in Loxicha, forcing the hand of the Carrasco administration, which wanted to clear the Zócalo of protestors before the Independence festivities of mid-September.

It is thus not surprising that public spaces in Oaxaca, and in particular, the Zócalo, became literal battle grounds between the state and opposition movements—even before the eviction of the teachers and the formation of the APPO. In 2005, amid much criticism and resistance, Ulises Ruiz converted the state government palace on the Zócalo into a museum and moved the governor's office and other branches of the state government to a bunker-like complex outside of the city, largely in order to thwart protestors seeking to disrupt government operations and defang demonstrations on the Zócalo. Initial discontent against Ruiz, which helped swelled the ranks of the APPO early on in 2006, was fueled by popular resentment over the governor's heavy-handed material alterations of the historic center near the Zócalo, which were widely criticized as needless destruction of the city's "*patrimonio de la humanidad*,"<sup>93</sup> designed to raise money for

---

<sup>92</sup> Urban anthropologist Setha Lowe argues that public spaces, such as the Latin American plaza, play a crucial role in the performance and mediation of conflict: *The creation and use of the plaza reveal important political dimensions of the meaning of public space as a focus of contestation and as a place where disagreements and conflicts over cultural and political objectives become concrete... Public spaces, such as the [...] plaza, are one of the last democratic forums for public dissent in a civil society. They are places where disagreements can be marked symbolically and politically or personally worked out. Without these significant central public spaces social and cultural conflicts are not clearly visible, and individuals can not directly participate in their resolution.* Setha M. Low, *On the Plaza: The Politics of Public Space and Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), 240.

<sup>93</sup> UNESCO World Heritage Site. The term *patrimonio* in Spanish, however, has a strong populist overtone, that arguably makes "patrimony" the property of el pueblo.

the PRI's presidential candidate in 2006, Roberto Madrazo. Martínez Vásquez, points out that the highly controversial remodeling of Oaxaca's public spaces played a crucial role in the political crisis that led to formation of the APPO, leading even middle class and normally apolitical sectors of society to support the teachers in demanding the removal of Ruiz from office.<sup>94</sup>

### **The Presence of Absence**

The day after the teachers' annual *plantón* was lifted in 2008, I walked through Oaxaca City's central plaza, the *Zócalo*, and found it very quiet, very still, very clean, nearly empty, except for a few families taking a Sunday stroll, a few tourists, a few vendors selling balloons, a distracted-looking policewoman wearing a thin coat that read "Policía Turística". The occupation of the *Zócalo* had ended the day before with a tumultuous "mega-march" and rally of more than a hundred thousand teachers and supporters of the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (APPO). They marched in commemoration of the 14<sup>th</sup> of June, 2006, when the state government violently—and unsuccessfully—attempted to evict the teachers from the *Zócalo* during their annual strike. I must confess that with the *plantón* gone, I felt confused, disoriented, and not a little disappointed. The distinction between the occupied plaza of the day before and the not quite empty plaza of the following day was extraordinary. Gone was the patchwork sea of tents and tarps, the stereos blasting *trova* from one end of the plaza and reggae to the other, the smell of various forms of street food and garbage; the barrage of political posters, stencils, and graffiti covering every wall; the televisions stacked on top of amplifiers playing images off of pirated DVDs of the violence that took place on that very spot in 2006. Gone were the tens of thousands of teachers and members of the APPO who had occupied the *Zócalo* for a month. I felt as though I had awoken to find that Wonderland had

---

<sup>94</sup> Martínez Vásquez, *Autoritarismo, movimiento popular y crisis política*, 46.



been a dream; overnight, every tent had been taken down, every vendor dispersed, every poster torn down, and every graffito effaced. It was *almost* as though the plantón had never happened.

Nearly every trace of the plantón had been erased, but not all. Across from the cathedral, for instance, on the stone floor under the distracted looking policewoman’s ambling feet, there remained a faint smear of still legible graffiti:

*This space was liberated by el Pueblo*  
*“PRIistas get out of the plantón”*  
*We don’t accept traitors*  
*(A) OKUPY AND RESIST (A) APPO*<sup>95</sup>

Even if every material trace of the plantón *had* been erased, the emptiness, stillness, and quietness of the Zócalo seemed to conjure the plantón by way of its conspicuous absence. A few days later, the traditional orchestras and folkloric dances staged on the Zócalo—“brought to you by the Constitutional State Government of Oaxaca!”—in their attempt to index the re-occupation of this space by the ruling party, el Partido de la Revolución Institucional (the Party of the Institutional Revolution, PRI), would still conjure the plantón in its negation.

El pueblo, which I henceforth leave unitalicized, is an extraordinarily polysemic term, and a ubiquitous point of reference in Oaxaca and throughout the Spanish-speaking world. The term is most often translated as a small village, a community, or more abstractly, as “the people”.<sup>96</sup> How does the Zócalo come

---

<sup>95</sup> “Espacio liberado por el Pueblo/ *Fuera* ‘PRIistas del plantón’/ *No admitimos Traidores/ (A) OKUPA Y RESISTE (A) APPO*”. In handwritten public signs, placards, posters, etc., in Mexico, quotation marks are often used for emphasis, rather than quotation.

<sup>96</sup> In what follows I draw on Paul Eiss’ work in Yucatán, in which he argues that these different definitions cannot easily be distilled in practice, and what is most pertinent to my own subject, he argues that el pueblo is more than a purely abstract and political subject—“it is also possession, community, and habitation”. El pueblo, Eiss argues, is “at once abstract and concrete, both generic and particular, as a collective body embedded in material and cultural things and shaped by the allegoresis through which these relationships have been ‘storied,’ as histories of el pueblo written from within and from without.” Much of what Eiss has to say about el pueblo in Yucatán holds true in Oaxaca, although I elaborate more on the subject of el pueblo and its particularities in the Oaxacan context further on. Eiss, *In the Name of El Pueblo: Place, Community, and the Politics of History in Yucatán*.

to be at once occupied and liberated, not merely by a mass of people, but by *el pueblo*? How is this occupation accomplished? And what is *el pueblo*, such that it is the agent of these transformations?

That the *Zócalo* is occupied and “liberated by el pueblo” is not just empty political rhetoric. If, as Eiss argues, el pueblo is “a collective body embedded in material and cultural things,” then the spray-painted phrase is, in some sense, actualized through the radical transformation of the built environment of the *Zócalo*, its symbols, and its sensory landscape.<sup>97</sup> In other words, the occupation of this space involves more than the presence of human bodies; it is also occupied through stunning visual and aural signs. Indeed, the signs of occupation are essential to the occupation itself.<sup>98</sup> As el pueblo is conjured, represented, inhabited and performed, it must also be recognizable, meaning it is imbricated within a representational economy.

### **Senses of Occupation**

*When there is no plantón in the Zócalo*, its landscape is dominated by the cathedral, its colonial buildings, lush trees, and its expanse of stone floor, where children play with enormous balloons, old men perform in traditional ensembles “brought to you by the Constitutional Government of the State of Oaxaca”, tourists gawk at the old men, and tourist police stroll around, bored and distracted in their black uniforms with silver lining, while the state police hang out in the open backs of black and white pickups on the corners of the plaza holding enormous firearms. During the tourist season, photo exhibits go on display and folkloric dance troupes perform, all of them accompanied by posters or spoken announcements that credit the state government, indexing its presence and power.

---

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Like the publics of which Warner writes, el pueblo “cannot have a discrete, positive existence;” its existence is contingent upon “its availability for subjective identification.” Michael Warner, “The Mass Public and the Mass Subject,” in *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York; Cambridge, Mass.: Zone Books ; Distributed by MIT Press., 2002), 159–86.

*When the Zócalo is occupied*, there are no police, nor any other obvious presence of the state's authority—at least in the case of a *plantón* of thousands of teachers (smaller occupations are more vulnerable). In the occupied Zócalo, one's senses are besieged by the aesthetics of the movement and its sights, sounds, smells, even tastes. The walls are symbolically oversaturated with posters, banners, graffiti, artwork, videos; there are people everywhere, and the open spaces of the plaza, too, are saturated with the sprawl of tents and tarps. The air is filled with the sounds of Radio Plantón, of various genres of loud music playing from various tents and commercial stands, of bustling people. The air is filled, also, with the smells of people, tortillas, beans, meat, fireworks, gutters, flowers. The taste is of street food; the feel is of a crowded, bustling, occupied plaza.

Even from a distance one can sense the *plantón* on the walls all around the historic center of Oaxaca—the closer one gets to the Zócalo, the more the walls are covered with political posters on top of older posters, graffiti and long streaks of paint covering older graffiti—layer upon layer upon layer. Around the cathedral, the colonial walls serve as a canvass for a cacophony of images and words: across the street from the cathedral, the upper façade of a large colonial palace is covered, for example, by a banner several meters wide and tall, depicting caricatures of the governor of Oaxaca, Ulises Ruiz Ortiz, the president of Mexico, Felipe Calderón, and the leader of the national teachers union, Elba Esther Gordillo, each dressed as sex workers. A large inscription on one side reads “HERE THEY ARE! THESE ARE THE ONES!” At street level, the same wall is covered by notebook- sized posters, of the sort that advertise concerts and musical events on low walls and lampposts across Mexico. These depict the silhouettes of men and women holding three speech bubbles with their arms above their heads: (SOL) (Y DAR) (Y DAD). Across<sup>99</sup> the street the walls of the cathedral itself have scribbled graffiti on them:

---

<sup>99</sup> A play on the words for “solidarity” (*solidaridad*), “sun” (*sol*), and “give,” (*dar y dad*).

*Today for the teachers, always for el pueblo*  
*Without an agreement there will be no commercial Guelagueta*

and perhaps the most frequently written message,

*Freedom for political prisoners!*

Around the corner of the cathedral, facing the Alameda de León and the rest of the Zócalo, is the small outdoor *tianguis*<sup>100</sup> of vendors; under large blue plastic tarps are two long rows of stands selling CDs, DVDs, clothes, crafts, and innumerable other products. Stereos blast hip-hop, ska, and *trova*. Crowds of people stand around televisions mounted on amplifiers, which play and replay images and sounds of the violent confrontations that took place between police and protestors in 2006—on that very spot. Protesters, passersby, and tourists walk past long tables covered with pirated and homemade DVDs about the APPO, the Zapatistas, and numerous other leftwing movements—armed, political, historical, theatrical, and so on.

In the center of the Zócalo is the gazebo, which looms over a tangle of rope, blue tarp and small camping tents, around which teachers sit or walk. Scattered throughout the plaza are several larger camps decorated with large posters: The Popular Revolutionary Front (*Frente Popular Revolucionario*, FPR) displays a large red and black poster depicting Emiliano Zapata in the center above a hammer and sickle, surrounded by the faces of Marx, Lenin, Stalin, and other *barbudos*. The Broad Front of Popular Struggle (*Frente Amplio de Lucha Popular*, FALP) boasts an enormous solid yellow poster that faces the government palace. Directly in front of the palace, the teachers of Section 22, by far the largest of the organizations then occupying the Zócalo during a plantón, have set up a large table, from which they play

---

<sup>100</sup> *Tianguis*, a street market.

loud *trova*, singer-songwriter music, with political lyrics: a male voice sings, “Long live the national strike!”

I sit on one of the benches surrounding the gazebo; its iron back rest is adorned with the shield that appears on the Mexican flag. Crowds of people walk past me and vendors on foot offer me corn esquites or woven cell phone pouches. Loud aggressive rap music is suddenly blasting from the bandstand; like the *trova* behind me, its lyrics also deal with social justice and *rebelión*, but it contrasts sharply with the slow, optimistic *trova* coming from the teachers’ table, which sounds like it was likely recorded in the seventies. I look up and see several young people that might be in their early twenties on the lower level of the gazebo. They are painting posters and hanging them around the elevated center stage of the bandstand. It seems to me that they look happy and, in a sense, fashionable, at least in comparison to the more conservatively dressed and serious looking teachers. Most are young men, and several wear thin jackets or vests with anarchist-inspired patches sewn on—a clenched fist, a crossed-out swastika, an (A) in a circle.

As Charles Hirschkind argues in a different context, this kind of gathering and expression constitutes “political practice *as sensory activity*”.<sup>101</sup> Indeed, there is a clear connection between Appistas’ political practices in 2008 and the sensory experience of being in the *plantón*, such that individual symbols communicate a message, but the ensemble of symbols and the affective impact that it has, also accomplishes something. Jeffrey Juris, who writes about anti-corporate globalization movements, argues that, “As performative rituals, mass mobilizations, and direct actions in particular, largely operate through affect, amplifying an initiating emotion, such as a sense of injustice, and transforming it into collective solidarity”, and in turn this affective solidarity “prepares activist bodies for action”.<sup>102</sup> When a political movement, such

---

<sup>101</sup> Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics*, Cultures of History; Variation: Cultures of History. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 31. Italics in the original.

<sup>102</sup> Jeffrey Juris, *Networking Futures: The Movements against Corporate Globalization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 126.

as the APPO, is visibly materialized in public space, then individual activists become political and affective subjects and objects, and their bodies likewise become political instruments and the active receptors of the sensual experience of the protest.<sup>103</sup>

The sensual intensity of the plantón thus fulfills the function of producing affective solidarity among activists, but it also turns the plantón into a performative terrain, where politics are physically embodied. This serves the purpose of creating a kind of stage, where the social transformation that activists envision on a larger scale can be performed on a small scale. I will have more to say about this later. It is possible that the performative element of the plantón might also serve the purpose of creating an illusion of magnitude. Whereas in 2006, the hundreds of thousands of bodies that participated in the APPO's demonstrations hardly needed any assistance in signaling the magnitude of the movement, in 2008, the boisterousness of the plantón helps to give the impression that the APPO remains a *movimiento de masas*, indeed, that it is el pueblo that has occupied the Zócalo, rather than mere representatives of it.

The Oaxacan plantonistas construct an alternative Zócalo, by occupying it with their bodies and by transforming it visually, aurally, aesthetically. The alternative sensual experience of the Zócalo highlights the fact that the occupied Zócalo has its own laws, its own authorities: vendors are allowed to sell, police are banned, politicians are mocked. During 2006, the Zócalo even served as a stage for "popular trials" of thieves and alleged government aggressors and provocateurs. As noted elsewhere, the plantón even has its own time, *horario de resistencia*, in negation of daylight savings time, which is seen as an imperialist imposition.

---

<sup>103</sup> In considering the visceral experience of inhabiting the occupied Zócalo it makes sense to follow Charles Hirschkind in thinking of "political practice as [a] *sensory activity*." Hirschkind formulates a compelling critique of what he calls "oculocentrism" within anthropology and argues that in analyzing ethico-political practices and reasoning, we would do well to explore "the way modes of perception developed in one domain of social action structure the performative skills brought to other domains." In the Oaxacan context, we could rephrase Hirschkind's question to ask: how do the "affects and sensibilities cultivated" by political activists through popular practices of sensual perception (such as media audition) "shape the modes of appraisal" that these people bring to other political practices? *The Ethical Soundscape*, 30–31.

## Place, memory and the aesthetics of rebellion

The use, appropriation, and transformation of public spaces has been of vital importance to the APPO since its inception. As a movement “of masses,” the APPO necessarily had to inhabit public space, although this is not unusual for popular movements in Mexico. The ways in which the APPO inhabited public spaces—even two years after its heyday—however, was particular to this movement, such that the distinctiveness of the movement, its symbolic repertoire and its practices, are in some sense reflected and echoed in the spaces it inhabits, as though the movement projected itself onto the walls of the city. In 2006 the sheer magnitude of the movement was visible throughout the city, in the amount of space that was occupied by the movement—the historic center, streets, government offices, barricades, radio stations, and huge stretches of the city, as during the “mega-marches”, were all occupied at once or at various moments. Of course, these spaces are always “occupied” by someone, but when they were occupied by the APPO, these spaces were visibly and audibly transformed. The flow of the streets was altered by barricades; the walls proclaimed anonymous messages in *pintas* or displays of political artwork; the immensely popular occupied radios reconfigured the political soundscape of the city, and of many other parts of the state. It is not my intention to romanticize or mythicize the movement, but it is clear that in 2006, the public spaces of Oaxaca were radically transformed by a massive quantity of voices finding and making new spaces to express themselves within the old cityscape.

Zócalos throughout Latin America have traditionally been the heart of civic, political, ecclesiastical, and economic power.<sup>104</sup> It is, therefore, understandable that the public spaces of Oaxaca, and in particular,

---

<sup>104</sup> As Low argues, “The creation and use of the plaza reveals important political dimensions of the meaning of public space as a focus of contestation and as a place where disagreements and conflicts over cultural and political objectives become concrete. . . . Public spaces, such as the Costa Rican plaza, are one of the last democratic forums for public dissent in a civil society. They are places where disagreements can be marked symbolically and politically or personally worked out. Without these significant central public spaces social and cultural conflicts are not clearly visible, and individuals can not directly participate in their resolution.” Low,

the Zócalo, became battle grounds between the state and popular movements, even before the eviction of the teachers and the formation of the APPO.

Although by 2008 the APPO was not exactly the movement of “masses” that it had been two years earlier, it continues to inhabit public space *viscerally*. Even two years after the APPO uprising, the remnants of the APPO movement remained intimately tied to, and expressed through, the spaces that it inhabited and occupied. A consideration of the visceral and sensorial experience of participating in the movement, or even of perceiving it, should then bring us to interrogate the relationship between space, the senses, and *memory*. A considerable amount of the political repertoire of the APPO in 2008 consisted of the commemoration of significant events during 2006, such as anniversaries of major battles or breakthroughs, and the performance of it as a metaphor and model. For instance, the marches were not only permeated with symbols alluding to the events of 2006—helicopters, gas masks, the 28 dead—they take place on symbolically charged dates—June 14, November 25, etc.—and they sought to reenact the very events that they commemorated. At a rally following the “mega-march” of June 14, with which the 2008 plantón concluded, several *barrikaderxs* ardently called on other young militants to help rebuild the barricade at Cinco Señores, the so-called “barricade of death”, as it was known in 2006. The barricade, which was not rebuilt that afternoon, would not have been protecting anything, but it would have recreated a sort of visceral simulacrum of what 2006 was for these young militants. It is the sensorial experience of the Oaxacan movement and the commemorative performance of its aesthetics that guide the transformations of the present.<sup>105</sup>

---

*On the Plaza*, 238, 240.

<sup>105</sup> In his work on diasporic religion of Garifunas in Honduras and the United States, Johnson describes the dialectic formed between memory and space, noting that “the representation of collective memory edits the past in ways that are sometimes intentional, often instrumental, and always transformative of the experience of the present.” Paul C. Johnson, *Diaspora Conversions: Black Carib Religion and the Recovery of Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 12. So too, in the midst a political movement that performs memory in public space, the “redemptive force” of memory is triggered by the sensual experience of material objects, be it oil lamps or barricades.



## Stories

### *Tezcatli and the Gazebo*<sup>106</sup>

I met Tezcatli on my first day at the plantón. After wandering around the occupied Zócalo for some time, I sat down on a bench in front of the large gazebo, with my back to the government palace. Not knowing whom to speak to, I decided to wait and see what happened, to sit and get a sense of the activities going on around me. As I sat waiting on that green metal park bench, I noticed several young people, mostly in their early twenties as well as teenagers, on the gazebo. They were playing loud music, rap and ska with lyrics of social protest, and many of them were painting large banners (the circumference of the gazebo was already covered with large painted banners, posters, and graffiti—political symbols, slogans, refrains, images). Others stood and talked or sat on small foldable chairs near a table that stood in front of the upper floor of the gazebo, facing the government palace, apparently the center of activity on the gazebo. Coming and going, young women greeted others with a quick kiss on the cheek, while young men clasped hands and bumped fists. A few were fair-skinned, but most were shades of brown like most of Oaxaca's native population. Almost all wore modern, urban clothes with visible elements of punk, ska, or hip-hop aesthetics.

I recognized the face of one of them. I had seen him in Michigan—that is, I had seen his image in a documentary, in which he spoke to the interviewer about the importance of community media for the APPO uprising in 2006.<sup>107</sup> Tezcatli was sitting next to a young man—who clearly stood out as a foreigner (a *solidario*) on account of his long blonde dreadlocks, beard and moustache—tinkering with a large video camera, while Tezcatli, whose face I had seen before, worked on a laptop with EZLN stickers on it. Dark-skinned, thin, with thick black hair and a sparse beard under his chin, he wore a white soccer jersey and

---

<sup>106</sup> All names and nicknames throughout the rest of this chapter are pseudonyms, unless otherwise noted. In choosing pseudonymic nicknames I have attempted to retain some at least the flavor of the originals. Nicknames are commonly used in Oaxaca among people across genders and ages. In some cases, the young people at the plantón I write about, got their nicknames during 2006, tying their identities to these experiences.

<sup>107</sup> Jill Irene Friedberg, *Un poquito de tanta verdad: A little bit of so much truth* (Seattle, WA: Corrugated Films, 2006).

worn out jeans. Tezcatli seemed to constantly be smiling, with a look, at once, of placidness and intensity.

After hesitating a moment, I gathered the courage to walk up the steps of gazebo and introduce myself. I walked up to Tezcatli, who gazed at me intensely, as I introduced myself. I told him that I was doing research on the Zócalo, that I study anthropology and history—but more than anything, I added, tripping over my words—*vengo a conocer el movimiento* (“I’m here to get to know the movement”).

“Welcome to the insurrection” (*bienvenido a la insurrección*), Tezcatli shot back, as the grin returned to his face. I had never been in an insurrection before, and I confess that being welcomed to one as such heightened my feeling of excitement and anticipation. Although, at that moment, more than an insurrection, the plantón reminded me of a market day in familiar plazas in Mexico City, evoking images of a twenty-first century Oaxacan adaptation of Diego Rivera’s surrealist historical painting, “Dream of a Sunday Afternoon on Alameda Park” (*Sueño de una tarde dominical en la Alameda Central*), with its panoramic cacophony of revolutionaries and historical figures from various different eras promenading amongst market women, balloon sellers, artists and catrinas, between the ahuehuate trees of Alameda Park, in the historic center of Mexico City, while scenes of social tension threaten to overtake the saturated plaza at any moment, as disgruntled dandies (*catrines*) scoff while a policeman shoves a campesino family out of the plaza, while the dictator Porfirio Díaz (1876-1880, 1884-1911) looms in the background, and revolutionaries on horseback, waving red-and-black anarcho-syndicalist flags, burst through the ahuehuetes onto the foreground of the crowded gazebo.

Tezcatli offered me a chair at the table next to him, and we spoke for around an hour, as we peered out at the bustle of the crowded Zócalo. While we were speaking, it became clear to me that Tezcatli was somewhat of an important person among the other youths buzzing around the gazebo, and he clearly seemed to wield some authority among them. While we talked, several people came up to him at various points—mostly the young men and women, but also teachers—to let him know that something was going

down amongst the vendors in front of the cathedral, or to ask him if he would be speaking at the teachers' radio station, Radio Plantón later on, and so on.

The table where we sat was the center of much activity. I learned that Tezcatli and several other young people on the gazebo were members of the anarchist-leaning youth collective, Voces Oaxaqueñas Construyendo Autonomía y Libertad (Oaxacan Voices Constructing Autonomy and Liberty, VOCAL), which formed after the contentious second constitutional assembly of the APPO,<sup>108</sup> and included anarchists, *libertarixs*,<sup>109</sup> Zapatista sympathizers and Adherents to The Other Campaign (later, The Sixth), and “*barrikaderxs*,” participants from the barricades.<sup>110</sup>

The gazebo had three levels: narrow doors led down a small flight of stairs to an underground circular hallway lined with currently shuttered bathrooms and concession stands; above ground level, the large circular base of the gazebo lined with benches facing inward around its perimeters; and, at its center was an elevated bandstand under a tall dome. The members of VOCAL and other youth collectives presently occupying the gazebo had strung banners emblazoned with protest art and writing all around the inner bandstand, shielding and hiding a nest of tents, sleeping bags, blankets, clothes, and a few people milling around (in the daytime)—playing an old guitar, talking, sleeping, passing a broom to their friends below. Like the rest of the Zócalo, the gazebo was occupied and transformed.

Like every other organization that joined the teachers in occupying the Zócalo, the members of VOCAL staked out a small area of the Zócalo as their own; and their occupation of the gazebo was marked loudly by the huge mass of visible markers: the tents, the banners and posters that curtained off the inner gazebo where the tents were located, the graffiti covering nearly every bit of stone that was left unmarked.

---

<sup>108</sup> VOCAL was formed in February of 2007, after the second APPO Congress.

<sup>109</sup> The meaning of which is closer to “anarchist” than “libertarian” as it is used in the United States

<sup>110</sup> For more on VOCAL in relation to youth movements in the APPO. Stephen, *We Are the Face of Oaxaca*, 245-249.

The constant presence of young people, with their punk hair or baggy pants, also served to visibly set the gazebo apart from other parts of the Zócalo. Teachers in the Zócalo were largely indistinguishable, in dress and physical appearance, from members of other organizations, such as the Communist Popular Revolutionary Front (FPR; not to be confused with the clandestine EPR), whereas the young anarchists and barrikaderxs were more visible and distinctive among the former, on account of their age and clashing aesthetics. The only other group that had a significant presence on the Zócalo that stood out from the other groups (to my eyes, at least) quite as much as the members of VOCAL were the Triqui indigenous women—from the embattled self-proclaimed “autonomous municipality” of San Juan Copala in the Mixteca Alta, which declared its autonomy in 2007, in the political effervescence of the 2006 movement—in their bright red embroidered *huipiles*.<sup>111</sup>

Granted, many members of VOCAL and the FPR knew and recognized each other very well. Although the two groups harbored significant animosity towards one another, and very different visions of what the APPO was and should be. It was still notable that both sought to occupy these spaces together, to be the APPO.

While we were talking, Tezcatli was also updating the VOCAL website on the small (essentially) communal laptop in front of him. After our initial conversation, over the following weeks, as I continued spending time at the plantón and on the gazebo, I rarely saw Tezcatli sit or stand in one place for more than a few minutes at a time; he was always on moving, attending to something, organizing an action, and speaking—he was certainly a charismatic orator—at various meetings: with teachers, vendors, activists from other groups, journalists, radio operators, and occasionally academics (such as “the anthropologist of the movement,” as he once referred to me).

---

<sup>111</sup> Some of the Triqui women were not there explicitly in support of Copala or the APPO, but as vendors—although the latter (not only Triquis) were a constant part of the occupied Zócalo’s social microcosm.

Doubtless, meeting Tezcatli became a key encounter that provided me access to a particular niche of the plantón and opened the door for me to meet many young activists, barrikaderos, and artists there, among others. I appreciated Tezcatli for this welcome and introduction. And as I came to know him, over the following years, I also came to appreciate his charisma, energy, and intelligence, even as I recognized things that disturbed me about him, such as his boldly authoritarian streak as an organizer (a remarkable trait for an anarchist), his disdain for all but the most radical of political orientations, and his celebratory stance towards revolutionary violence (in speeches, writing, and conversations, at any rate) as a means of solving any and all of Mexican society's grievances. He spoke of violence as a redemptive force, untroubled by any possible contradiction in espousing violence for the benefit of *el pueblo*, even if the majority of people, even amongst allies, tended to reject violence or thought of it as only appropriate in certain exceptional contexts.

Tezcatli grew up in a working class family in Oaxaca City. While attending the Autonomous University of Chapingo, in the State of Mexico, where he studied agronomic engineering, he got involved with the social movement in San Salvador Atenco, which also suffered brutal repression in 2002 and again in 2005, as farmers there resisted having their lands expropriated for the construction of a new international airport for Mexico City. Upon learning of the conflict emerging in Oaxaca in May 2006, he returned to the city in order to participate in the movement, joining one of the barricades and gaining prominence among other young radicals as a passionate and eloquent organizer and orator. In 2007 he was arrested and sent to Ixcotel prison for several months. Years later, I would also meet his older sister, Alma, who shared his radicalism though not his affection for the spotlight, during a solidarity brigade to protest the Loxicha prisoners' transfer to a maximum security prison in 2013.

On a personal level, I was also silently bothered, at times, in those early days at the plantón, by Tezcatli's occasional expressions of disdain towards me, through which he expressed a pointed criticism of

my class position, as a relatively privileged Mexican-American from Mexico City, studying in the United States: For instance, at the plantón, he would sometimes make snide off-handed remarks to the effect that I smelled like perfume (although I did not actually use perfume or scents), implying that I was a *catrín* (a dandy) or bourgeois. On another occasion, while we were running to catch a bus to take us to a performance at an occupied school, he asked me if I happened to be carrying any deodorant—not because he ever used it, he added—but because his baseball cap smelled funny, and he figured I might have some on me. While such expressions of class judgement or disdain stung on a personal level, they served as important lessons by forcing me to see myself through the eyes of others and to grapple with indelible class, ethnic, and cultural differences between me and the Oaxacans I would come to work and collaborate with over the following years. Solidarity would not erase our differences, nor would it exculpate me from the power differentials structuring our interactions, or from having them pointed out to me.

Later that evening, after watching an *anarko-punk* theater performance at the occupied pedagogy school (CRENO), a tremendous thunder storm caught us in a compañera's car, as she offered a few people rides home. The summer downpour began flooding the streets of the colonia we were driving through, so Tezcatli invited us to take refuge in his house, which was nearby, until the storm passed. His house was far more modest than I had imagined it would be—I had imagined him living in a middle-class home, on account of his studies at the agricultural university at Chapingo, in Morelos State (where he had joined the protests against the proposed new Mexico City airport in San Salvador Atenco in 2006, before returning to Oaxaca to join the APPO). However, his family's kitchen, where we sat together, was made of bare cement. There was a rustic wooden table, where we sat, near an old radio, and there were vegetables on the counter and roaches scurrying from the light. There was a photograph of Emiliano Zapata hanging on the wall, and frightened chickens in the patio outside. As we sat, someone immediately turned the radio on to Radio Plantón, as they almost always did whenever a radio was at hand, and Tezcatli offered us some food,

tortillas, beans and salsa, and, later, vegetable soup. As we ate, the conversation inevitably turned to politics and, eventually, to literature. At some point, I mentioned my love of the Argentine writer Julio Cortázar, and Tezcatli bitinglly interjected that he did not like Cortázar. He had read the novel *Rayuela*, he said, and found it far too individualistic and self-indulgent; Cortázar was simply too bourgeois, and too much of a Europhile for his taste—unlike, say, Gabriel García Márquez. I tried defending Cortázar by bringing up his “political” novel, *Libro para Manuel*. Tezcatli was not familiar with it, but he remained unconvinced by Cortázar—and unimpressed with my literary proclivities. Yet it was his next interjection that would later stand out most in my memories of that conversation around Tezcatli’s kitchen table: Tezcatli began railing about intellectuals and academics, particularly those “movement intellectuals” who had participated, to varying degrees, in the APPO movement in 2006. He had particularly harsh words for a well-known sociologist who has written extensively about social movements in Oaxaca. After lambasting this scholar for what he felt to be a tepid and fair-weather support for the APPO, he offered a final utterance on the matter, before moving: “The only intellectuals that I’m interested in,” he sentenced, “are the ones who throw rocks.”<sup>112</sup> I couldn’t be certain, but I felt fairly certain that the comment was partly directed at me, as well.

### *Juchi*

I met Juchi at the gazebo one evening, during an impromptu meeting of “democratic teachers”<sup>113</sup> (anarchist-leaning teachers), members of VOCAL, and other libertarixs. A teacher known as Profesora Alba and Tezcatli had convened the meeting in order to plan a response to the announcement issued that afternoon by the Central Committee of Section 22 stating that it had come to an agreement with Elba Esther Gordillo, the leader of the national teachers’ union at the national level. Many of the teachers at the “base”

---

<sup>112</sup> *Los únicos intelectuales que me interesan son los que lanzan piedras.*

<sup>113</sup> They referred to themselves as “democratic teachers” in this particular meeting’s informational flyer.

level of Section 22 were infuriated by this because, aside from the state governor, Gordillo was perhaps the most widely reviled figure among the teachers of the plantón. Juchi tended to keep his distance from VOCAL, and especially from Tezcatli, although he was close to a number of radical, mostly young female, Section 22 teachers who were at the meeting.

Juchi was then thirty years old, although he looked and acted like a younger man. He was also an LGBTQ activist, an occasional cross-dresser who identified as a *Muxe*<sup>114</sup> (despite not being from the Isthmus), and a playwright, as well as an avowed punk and a Zapatista sympathizer. He later told me that he had supported the Zapatistas since he was about fifteen years old, in 1994, at the time of the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas. Juchi grew up with his parents and several brothers and sisters in a humble house in Santa Lucia del Camino, a municipality on the outskirts of Oaxaca City, which was also the site of an important barricade in 2006. Juchi presently occupied a single room in the back of the house where he grew up, although his parents were by then living in Mexico City. His parents were then living with some of Juchi's siblings in Mexico City, although they moved back not long after.

Santa Lucia was the site of one of the most important barricades during the conflict in 2006. The Calicanto barricade controlled the access to a major road leading out of the city, making it a crucial checkpoint for preventing the entry of the nefarious paramilitary “convoys of death” that repeatedly attacked APPO sympathizers during 2006. The barricade also guarded the road to one of the major radio stations that was occupied by the APPO in 2006. Many of the most violent battles fought that year between APPO supporters and state and paramilitary forces were over the control of radio and television stations, since these became the single most important organizational tool for the APPO during the conflict. The Calicanto barricade in Santa Lucía was also the site where Bradley Will, an American reporter for IndyMedia New

---

<sup>114</sup> Muxes, a third gender category common around Juchitán, are generally homosexual men who live and present themselves as women in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, in south-east Oaxaca, particularly in the Zapotec town of Juchitán de Zaragoza.



York was murdered by paramilitaries on October 27th, 2006. Brad Will, the anarchist journalist who accidentally filmed the moment of his own death, became the most famous name among the more than twenty people (twenty-six, according to Juchi) who were killed during the 2006 conflict, and he has since been become virtually canonized by APPO supporters as a martyr for the movement. The Santa Lucía anarchists organized a memorial on the anniversary of Brad Will's death each October, until 2011.

Juchi and I became fast friends, and he offered to show me around Santa Lucía. I had become fascinated by the large number of punks who had joined VOCAL and other young activists on the gazebo, and I was hoping to interview Juchi about Oaxacan punks and anarchism in the APPO. Juchi, however, assumed that our time would be best spent by him showing me the site where the barricade had stood, as well as the spot where Brad Will was shot. We met in front of the colorful little colonial church across the street from the municipality, in front of which policemen lingered around a tree talking. We walked a few blocks to where the barricade had stood two year earlier—here they would drink chocolate, brought by neighbors at night; over there sat the sacks of granite and the giant truck tires and wooden planks, anything to block the road—he pointed, remembering. The center of Santa Lucia was a PRI stronghold, Juchi explained, which was partly the reason for which the barricade was the site of constant violence, since most of the people who would spend days and nights at the barricade to defend it came from outlying areas and were ill received by the many Priísta families in the center.

*If something happened in the city, shootings or deaths, lots of people would show up at the barricades. People would spend nights here, and women would bring us food. They'd bring tortillas, beans, coffee. If they were really nice, they'd bring hot chocolate.*

With his face masked he would yell at his Priísta neighbors from the barricade, that they were assholes, *culeros!* for not supporting them, for not defending them from the shooting. As we walked around he told me about being chased by his own neighbors, who did not know who he was, as they shot at him

and his *compañeros*. *¡Corran, que ahí vienen esos culeros!* Run, cause those assholes are coming!

When Brad Will was murdered, he told me, as we stood on the site where it happened, he was there. He saw it happen. “Brad wasn’t being careful,” the Priístas were shooting at them, and Brad kept getting closer to them, among the other barricaderos, dodging between parked cars on the narrow street. When the ambulance came, “I helped pick him up”, but by then he was already dead. Later that afternoon several APPO spokespersons arrived at Santa Lucia to make statements about Brad’s death, which infuriated Juchi. “Shut up already!” he claims to have yelled at Flavio Sosa as he was giving a speech, and he did shut up. It was not the time to be talking, it was time to take action. *Era la hora de los putazos*, “it was time for blows”. Now he is afraid of being recognized by his neighbors. Why? Because he knows who murdered Brad, it was his Priísta neighbor.

The last days of October, after Brad Will was shot, and all of November were “black days in Oaxaca”, as Juchi remembers. Many influential voices across Mexico, including the state government in Oaxaca, business interests in Oaxaca, the national leadership of the teachers’ union, and news commentators on Televisa, had been calling on the federal government for months to send federal troops into Oaxaca. When Will was murdered, the Fox presidency finally conceded and by the 28th of October, the Federal Preventive Police (PFP) and the Federal Investigation Agency (AFI) were stationed outside the city. On the 29<sup>th</sup>, the PFP entered Oaxaca with tanks, anti-riot troops, and helicopters, and occupied the Zócalo. Throughout November the streets and skies in Oaxaca would become filled with the PFP’s tear gas and the thick black smoke of burning cars and buses that the APPO would use to barricade its occupied media stations and strongholds.

As the PFP entered Oaxaca and the barricade in Santa Lucía was besieged by attacks, Juchi says that he received a personal death threat. He cleaned himself as best he could—*because at the barricade his hands and face would end up black with dirt, soot, grease*—and a woman who owned the *tlapalería* (little

hardware store) across the street gave him a clean shirt, so that he would not be recognized as he walked home. He went into his house and did not emerge again for days. He spent a few more days at his aunt's house before his father drove him to Mexico City, where he could stay with relatives. As they drove out of Oaxaca, he was very afraid, he said, because the AFI was stopping cars leaving the city; they had pictures of wanted individuals. He reached Mexico City and stayed there for many months, in self-exile. Yes, the AFI was the worst, he said. While the PFP marched through the streets in their anti-riot gear, dispersing crowds, the AFI marched behind them, "picking up" anyone who stayed behind. "If your hands were dirty (from throwing rocks), they'd grab you". There were few reports from 2006 of protestors being armed with anything beyond rudimentary weapons, such as rocks or homemade bottle-rocket launchers.

Having walked around Santa Lucía for about an hour as Juchi told me stories, we walked to his home. His mother owns the property where he lives, but now there is another family living in the one-floor concrete house against the wall of a long and narrow parcel of land. Dogs, chickens, and children walk around or sit on the grassy floor. In the center of this long thin property, there is a *sabino* tree. As we walked by it, Juchi told me that when the PFP took Oaxaca, helicopters circled the skies for days; one of these military helicopters flew over his home during the days when Juchi was in hiding. As it flew over, Juchi hid under the sabino and yelled at the helicopter, *¡chinguen a su madre!* (fuck your mothers!)—the helicopter hovered for a few moments while they looked for him, but he was hidden by the tree. "Do you really think they heard you?" I asked. "Well," he thought for a moment, "the helicopter stopped, so I thought that was why."

Juchi lives in a small separate room in the back of the property: a tiny kitchen, a bathroom, and an austere little room with concrete walls, a concrete floor, an old mattress on a rusted metal frame, and a short bookcase with a radio and a few books on it. Hanging on the wall behind his bed were two black and white

photographs of Emiliano Zapata, a picture clipped from a fanzine of two Mexican punks with enormous spiked hair, an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, a picture of Juchi as a boy, and two pictures of his parents, one in color and one in black and white. As we stepped inside, Juchi turned on the radio and adjusted the dial until he found Radio Plantón, the teachers' independent radio station. It was on 103.1 FM this time, but they frequently have to change the frequency because the government blocks their signal. He had to move the antenna in order to catch the faint signal. Juchi sat on the edge of his bed and I sat on a small plastic chair, and we spoke some more.

He told me how in the early days of Radio Plantón, in 2005, he was given a spot on the radio on which to have a weekly show called *La Zona Rosa*, The Pink Zone, which dealt with LGBTQ issues, a testy subject in Oaxaca, even amongst leftists.

In 2006 Juchi met Subcomandante Marcos, the spokesman for the Zapatistas, when he went through Oaxaca on his national tour for the Other Campaign. Because Juchi showed up at Marcos' event in the Zócalo wearing a wig, a sparkling dress, heels and makeup, members of the Popular Revolutionary Front (the communists) tried to prevent him from climbing the steps of the gazebo to meet Marcos. When he finally pushed his way past them, he had trouble climbing the steps because his dress was too tight to lift his legs, and two compañeros had to lift him up. Marcos, who promotes *Los otros amores* ("Other Loves") as an integral part of the Other Campaign (later, the Sixth), was happy to pose for a picture with Juchi. Right as they took the picture, Juchi said, "I grabbed his butt!" (*le agarré la nalga*).

At that time Juchi was working for a new human rights commission recently created by the state government. However, within months of his joining, Juchi was fired when he announced that he was going to San Salvador Atenco in the State of Mexico to join hundreds of others in denouncing the brutal repression of police forces, most notoriously the PFP, against flower vendors and communal farmers.

At the time we spoke Juchi no longer had the show, but he was the main organizer of a theater collective called La Bazukada. During my time in Oaxaca, I saw him perform with Bazukada on a couple of occasions, once at the CRENO, a pedagogy school for teachers in training which was then occupied by the *normalistas*, in support of the teachers' strike—where I would meet Erika, the daughter of a Loxicha prisoner, several years later. I saw Juchi perform a second time in the Zócalo for the “closing ceremony” of the plantón. Years later, Juchi told me that, as a teenager in the late nineties, he and other anarchist punk friends participated in different solidarity actions for the Loxicha prisoners, including a caravan to Loxicha in 1997.

### *El Enano and El Pelos*

I was walking past the cathedral when I heard El Enano shout my name. I turned around and saw him sitting on the raised concrete ledge that borders the perimeter of the Zócalo, near the cathedral. As I looked over, he waved a *cahuama* of beer (akin to a “forty” in the US), which he was sharing with another two other *compas*. Enano was an adolescent, one of the youngest of the gazebo punks, who sported a mohawk; and he was frequently drunk. He was also one of my favorite people at the gazebo. I sat down next to him and Pelos, who asked me for a cigarette (as I was an occasional smoker at the time, and I had become aware of the social power of cigarettes in this particular fieldsite). I handed him one, and it quickly switched hands: No one among the young gazebo crowd ever smoked a whole cigarette on their own, it was simply a matter of course that cigarettes were communal objects, such that if anyone produced a cigarette, it would certainly be passed around to anyone in the group. The same went for beer and food. That night, El Enano and Pelos shared anecdotes from 2006. Neither of them had been fond of the teachers before 2006, they explained, but that changed after the movement; previously, they could not identify with the teachers' message or methods. And neither of them were politically active before then. Now Enano was an “anarko-

punk,” an occasional member of VOCAL, and a participant in La Bazukada, Juchi’s anarchist theater troupe.

He and Pelos had met in 2006, although they were at different barricades. Enano became a permanent fixture at his barricade, he explained, and proudly added that he “fought in every battle” against the Federal Police, including on November 2, 2006, during the defense of Radio Universidad. Although on November 25th, he recalled, panic broke out when federal police fired at a nearby crowd of people; taking a confessional mode, he recalled how he approached a stranger on the street, crying, and begged this woman whom he had never seen before to please let him walk away with her and say that he was her son, if they were stopped, so that the police wouldn’t take him away. She accepted and helped him to get away. “Fortunately,” he added in mock seriousness, as a smile returned to his face, on that occasion “I was dressed as a civilian—not as a punk.”

Pelos boasts that he became known as Comandante Pelos—because his *compas* at the barricade told him to bring three trucks back to the barricade (that is, commandeer them temporarily, a common practice by protestors in Oaxaca, who then return “borrowed” vehicles to their owners, and usually targeting only corporate fleets). Three trucks, he stutters, but he brought, you want to know how many, he brought back six, with the help of more *compas*. That’s why they called him Comandante Pelos. Now they don’t respect him, but then he was known as Comandante. Pelos is twenty-four years old, and an artist. He’s been a *grafitero* “since 1998”.

In 2007 he was arrested by the Federal Investigation Agency (AFI). “For what?—for not signing some document,” that he needed to sign after being arrested a year earlier. When they arrested him, he said “they planted a gun on me, and then they beat the shit out of me.” They broke one of his teeth, and a dentist later had to “pull the nerve out” and give him a fake tooth. It caused him great anguish, he lamented, that many of his *compas* thought that he had sold them out, because he got out of jail after three days, when

others took much longer. But he never betrayed them, he went on, sorely. And they didn't even try to help get him out, he added with bitterness, the way they helped other political arrestees and prisoners. Now he was working in a manufacturing job, although he expressed some nervousness about his ability to hang on to it, particularly, as he claimed to have spent "the last month being drunk."

As we were sitting on the edge of the Zócalo drinking, a pickup truck filled with armed police drove by us on the street, a few meters away. Enano couldn't resist the urge to whistle obscenely at them as they drove by and repeatedly yelling that they should go "*chingar a su madre*," between swigs of beer. This, partly, was the thrill of the plantón for these young radicals—to be free to drink beer on the plaza and to yell obscenities at the police, who would not step onto the Zócalo while the teachers were occupying it.

### *Alei*

Every time I ran into Alei, he would ask me for a cigarette. It never failed. But that was later. When I first started hanging out on the gazebo in the Zócalo, he would often glower at me from beneath distrustfully knitted eyebrows, or so it seemed to me. I was fairly certain that he and another young activist, Puma, were deeply suspicious of my motives for spending time among them. I don't know what led to a thaw between us, but eventually we got to talking—perhaps it was because he saw that Enano and I got along well, or perhaps it was simply the act of sitting together in the same circle of people on the gazebo, as someone played at an old Spanish guitar at one in the morning, or perhaps it was the fact that he always wanted a cigarette and I always had one to share. Whatever the case, we started talking one night, after he asked me for a cigarette, and soon we were asking each other questions: Neither of us was from Oaxaca, and neither of us had been there in 2006, but we were both drawn there by it in its aftermath.

Alei had only been in Oaxaca for about a year when I met him. He is originally from Cancún,

where his father was a waiter in the hotel district—*pero chupaba mucho y hasta le salió una barrigota* (“but he was drinking a lot, and he even started to get a huge belly”). He would get drunk frequently at the restaurant where he worked until he became a business partner at another restaurant—then he started drinking even more. Thus, at the behest of Alei’s mother, they moved to Oaxaca and his father became a teacher.

In Cancún, Alei’s father had been a member of the Communist Party and later became an adherent of the EZLN’s Other Campaign. When Subcomandante Marcos took the Other Campaign through Cancún on its national tour, he and his father were the ones who arranged Marcos and his retinue’s arrival. Alei talked quickly and excitedly, smoking anxiously, and his excitement increased as he recounted how large conches were trumpeted at the moment that Marcos entered the venue at El Rincón Zapatista, conjuring mythical images of an exalted Mayan warrior.

Alei’s father once ran for the office of municipal president in the rural town near Cancún where they lived, but he lost. As a form of consolation to the losing opposition, the winner of the election offered him the position of municipal treasurer, but he rejected it—*por sus principios* (“because of his principals”). His wife, Alei’s mother, became very angry with him for rejecting the job. When I asked why she got so angry he explained that it was because she is from Belize. From Belize? I asked, mildly confused. Yes, his grandfather is *negrito*—*hasta con pelo chino* (“black, with curly hair and all”)—and his grandmother is a *mexicana blanca* (“a white Mexican”). But what did that have to do with her getting angry at her husband for rejecting the treasury on account of “his principles”? Oh, because being from Belize she doesn’t care about (local) politics and thought it foolhardy to turn down a good job. Did he miss it over there? I asked him. Yes, he answered, but he was happy in Oaxaca, and very active in the movement, and he imagined that he would probably eventually die there too.

It was past midnight, and we were sitting in a circle next to the table on the gazebo. The Zócalo was



mostly quiet, the music was off, and most of the teachers were sleeping in tents or under tarps; we could hear some still milling around, a few talking quietly, and several others snoring. Those who were still awake could probably hear the sound of the guitar playing intermittently on the gazebo. Alei was telling me that he wanted to get two tattoos—a Mayan symbol and a hammer-and-sickle, one on each shoulder—when one of the boys staying on in the gazebo, who was probably between twelve and fourteen, asked Alei to teach him how to play a song on the guitar. “I can’t play bar chords”, he told me, as he proceeded to teach the boy a few chords from “La Bamba.”

Later that night, Alei and Enano taught me how to play a card game using *baraja española* (tarot cards), and I showed them how to play blackjack (*veintiuno*) with a *baraja americana*, a deck of playing cards that I often carried in my bag. Neither of them had ever played blackjack before, but they quickly became enthusiastic players. After a few rounds, a few other young women and men had gathered around the three of us, looking over our shoulders, cheering or commenting. None of us had much loose change, so we played with one *peso* bets, and the dealer’s bank rarely accumulated more than six or seven pesos, passing quickly from hand to hand. In order to keep the game going when one of the others ran out of coins, I gave away a few fifty *centavo* coins I had in my pocket. After losing the six or seven pesos I began with, however, one of the others then lent *me* the fifty centavos. Alei and Enano burst out laughing when they decided that the dealer of the game would be known as “*el capitalista*.” By luck, or perhaps due to our ad-hoc rules, I lost all my change quickly, but I was happy to stay out of the game, wishing to avoid becoming known as *el capitalista*.<sup>115</sup>

---

<sup>115</sup> Earlier that day a guy at the gazebo, a young man who lived on the street and occasionally spent time on the gazebo, asked me to please give him *el bajón* so he could buy something to eat, since he had not eaten all day, so I handed him some coins in my pocket and he bought himself some *plátanos fritos* and a soft drink. I do not recount this small anecdote so as to appear noble or generous, but because I cannot deny now, as I could not deny or hide then, that (even as a graduate student) I was comparatively affluent compared to the majority of the young activists on the gazebo—and it made me uncomfortable: even in games, “*el capitalista*” was the enemy. I might buy someone a meal, but I wasn’t about to switch places, which made me feel like a hypocrite and a crook. When Tezcatli brought pots full of food later on, as he did each evening, the young man who had asked me for *el bajón* ran to get ahead of the others and ate voraciously. I’d already eaten.

## Tanis

I met Tanis in late December, 2008, at the Primer Festival Mundial de la Digna Rabia, (the First Global Festival of the *Digna Rabia*—rage with dignity) organized by the EZLN in Mexico City and Chiapas. She was there with a few other members of VOCAL, and she spoke at one of the panels on the topic of repression in Oaxaca. I had seen her often at the plantón and at marches in Oaxaca, but had never spoken to her. She tells me that, like so many of her *compas*, she had been a political prisoner because of her work with the APPO, in 2007, which is why she now works on the political prisoners' commission in VOCAL. Years later, I would frequently encounter Tanis during my visits to Ixcotel Prison to visit the Loxicha prisoners.

I asked her then what exactly VOCAL was, as I was trying to write a paper that was partly about it, although I'd come to realize that I couldn't define it. She had difficulty answering the question: VOCAL is not an organization, she explained, as "it doesn't seek to simply unite people, but to work". It is an anti-partisan collective dedicated to struggling for "a real transformation". She is uncomfortable telling me how many members it has. "They ask us this all the time," but she always has difficulty answering, because there is no official membership, and they don't take roll-calls. I insist, and she finally concedes that there might be around thirty-five stable participants working in the collectives' several "commissions", such as the one that works with political prisoners, of which she is a part. The commission acts as a "mirror" for the political prisoners; it helps to "get their voice out", but they also do "concrete" things, like going to their legal hearings, making public denunciations, and selling crafts made by political prisoners. When Tezcatli was in prison, he would ask for a lot of things, because "he has a lot of initiative". Another commission works on "networking and connections" with *compas* and groups in other parts of Oaxaca.

How did VOCAL begin? It came together in 2006 as a reaction to attempts within the APPO to turn it into a political party. They met at the Soriana barricade, named after a grocery-store chain (because at the barricade they used many shopping carts taken from the grocery store). The collective came out of a meeting of young people who did not feel included under the acronym of “APPO”. When they went public as a collective in March, 2007, and issued their “manifiesto”,<sup>116</sup> a spokesperson for the FPR accused them of being “*porros*”: violent provocateurs paid by the government to infiltrate the movement and criminalize it. After the meeting, however, a police convoy harassed them and then followed some of them when they got in a taxi, which should have been enough proof that they were not police agents. That was the first time that they were criminalized.

Is VOCAL an “anarchist collective”, as the media frequently brands them? No, she says, in VOCAL there are anarchists, Zapatistas, Magonistas, adherents of the Other Campaign, and *barrikaderxs*. Is she an anarchist? No. Is she a *barrikadera*? Yes! she answers excitedly, and shows me her shirt, which reads *Hecho en la barrikadas* (“Made in the barricades”) under the symbol of an Aztec eagle that identifies products “Made in Mexico”.

In 2006 Tanis was getting a bachelor’s degree in sociology, doing research on social movements. She felt solidarity with the Zapatistas, but she was not involved in political activism. In May of 2006, she was working on a small research project, unrelated to her thesis, for which she was going to the teachers’ *plantón* every day to do interviews with her aunt who is a teacher. On June 14th, they called her early in the morning to tell her not to go to the *plantón* because of the *desalojo*, but she didn’t understand what was happening and went anyway. She got caught in the violence, but fortunately, a friend of her family owned a

---

<sup>116</sup> Available at the VOCAL website, of which various archived versions are available online, including VOCAL, “Voces Oaxaqueñas Construyendo Autonomía y Libertad (VOCAL),” accessed August 23, 2018, <https://regeneracionradio.org/index.php/autonomia/autonomia/item/917-voces-oaxaque%C3%B1as-construyendo-autonom%C3%ADa-y-libertad-vocal>.

cyber-café near the Zócalo, and he was able to give out many Coca-Colas [to pour on themselves in order to protect their skin from the police's gasses]. Like many other people, she had until then not been highly sympathetic towards the teachers' movement, but she recognizes that at that point, Section 22 ceased to be a "movement for resources".

When the barricades appeared, she went with a *compa* to the one at Ciudad Universitaria, which guarded Radio Universidad. She began going as a "researcher", but the barricade "changed her perspective", and she became a part of the movement. She tells me that at the barricade she became aware that "different relations were possible". Many of the young people at the barricades certainly had the wrong attitude, but all the same, there "one could talk and learn... at the barricades we learned that something else was possible".

There were three barricades around the university campus—Cinco Señores, Ciudad Universitaria, and Soriana. Part of the barricade of Cinco Señores, where Tanis stayed, was known as *la barricada de la muerte*, "The Barricade of Death", which is where the "chavos banda", the street kids, and the addicts were.

She worked at a medical center that was set up at the barricade by the famous Doctor Bertha, where they would attend old people and the chavos banda. Sometimes she would go home at night, but more often she would stay there. In the mornings she would heat water for the sick, during the day she would take wounded people to the clinic in the university; she would talk to people, the few that they would let through. And at night, *era estar a la expectativa* ("it was awaiting in suspense"), should something happen or someone try to get through. They were there until November 25, but then the father of a friend of hers, who was in prison, asked them not to return to the barricade, and they didn't. On the 29th, the rector of the university, who had condoned the movement's use of Radio Universidad until then, asked for it back, and that was the end of the barricade.

Tanis never finished her degree in sociology because her thesis was rejected, but she was displeased with her research anyway, which was focused on the work of NGOs fighting against the Puebla-Panama Plan.<sup>117</sup> Her experience with them showed her the bad side of the movement, she says, without elaborating. Now she works as a research assistant on the topic of “contextual education” in Oaxaca, influenced by Paulo Freire’s pedagogy of liberation.

“So that’s my story,” she concluded, “I went to the barricade at Cinco Señores, and I didn’t leave.”

## Conclusion

I conclude with a reflection, first, on the metaphors of the APPO, of its barricades, of its real or imagined utopias, and the effect they had in shaping the future aspirations of the “*encapuchados*” of the movement. and, second, by considering the cultural impacts of the APPO, and particularly of the plantón. Juris argues that while “the most obvious way to evaluate whether movements succeed is to assess their impact on the state... that is, whether they generate concrete policy outcomes within institutional domains”, but that since movements often fail to produce immediately discernible impacts at the policy level, this may in fact not be the best place to look in evaluating them. Indeed, if we were to consider the APPO’s direct impact on the state, the movement might very well look like a simple failure, considering that it did not succeed in achieving the destitution of governor Ulises Ruiz or any changes in the state constitution. However, following other social movement scholars, Juris clarifies that “the impact of social movements... is likely to be mediated, not direct... In other words, political change may be institutionalized, but only after a long-term process of discursive change. In this sense, social movements—both old *and* new—operate on the terrain of culture, generating new ideas, frames, values, and identities”. Bearing this in mind, what

---

<sup>117</sup> It was subsequently renamed Plan Mérida.

impact might the APPO's plantón have at a cultural, discursive level? I believe that one such impact that the APPO may be effecting is a redefinition of what constitutes *public space*.

Of course, publicness is not the only attribute of a plantón or graffiti; their attributes and entailments are multiple. In 2006 the extraordinary mass of people that occupied streets, plazas, and barricades may have produced a strong impression of these spaces as profoundly public, as possessions of el pueblo. However, in 2008, other attributes of the plantón had gained greater prominence; for instance, the reduced number of activists, the fact that it is dominated by the teachers' union, its seeming return to being an intransigent ritual, as in years prior to 2006. Graffiti too has attributes other than publicness: it can be perceived as illegal, unseemly, an imposition. I mention all of this in order to highlight the fact that practices such as these clearly have other attributes, and thus entailments other than those intended by its agents, such as the possible disenchantment of their captive audience.

That said, the APPO generated important debate across vast sectors of Oaxaca society as to what constitutes public space, what individuals and movements can do with public space, and what the state can do with it. As Lowe argues, public spaces are important democratic fora, in which social conflicts can be made visible and negotiated. Many older members of the APPO, such as the teachers of Section 22 or the communists of the FPR, and other members of established organizations with varying histories of political organizing, draw on many years of experience and of metaphors in their interpretations of the events of 2006 and in their visions of the future. For many, if not most, of the *barrikaderxs*, *encapuchadxs*, and other young militants of the APPO, on the other hand, 2006 was their induction by fire into political struggle. A small minority of the young militants whom I met in Oaxaca had been politically active before 2006. I think that there is a connection between this and the fact that it is these youths, and not their elders, who speak of the 2006 in terms of "utopia." In the barricades, they say, "we saw that things could be different." In the

barricades they found utopia.<sup>118</sup>

Utopias are a kind of metaphor by which people envision a desired future (and past, of course). When I first began doing fieldwork in Oaxaca, I found it striking that for many of the youths who joined the APPO in 2006, utopia then looked like a barricade. Furthermore, for the rebellious youth of the APPO, “*desmadre*” became a form of practicing politics, and political practice as a sensory activity intimately tied to the aesthetics of their rebellion, to the materiality of particular places, and to memory. Their model for rebellion was constituted by their aesthetic sensibilities, their memory, their utopias, their *desmadre*. These constitute the metaphors and models of the habitus that they carried into the future, and which will in some respect shape that future. When the stenciled image of Emiliano Zapata sporting a mohawk and scars proclaims, “See you in 2010” (*Nos vemos en el 2010*), it generated visions of future barricades, those of 2010, the centennial anniversary of the Mexican Revolution, and a return to utopia.

-\*-

---

<sup>118</sup> *To be sure, the furnishings of a remembered space and past may be fantastically reconstructed, or even invented, both in the move to conscious recollection and in the additional move from individual to collective memory...[yet] the representations of collective memory edit the past in ways that are sometimes intentional, often instrumental, and always transformative of the experience of the present.* In Johnson, *Diaspora Conversions*, 12.

### Chapter 3. Oaxacan Dialogues (Political *Quesillo*)

*How is anthropology to make its own vulnerability central? This question clearly implies others: a project that is vulnerable is one that may fail; how, then, can anthropology consciously embrace the possibility of its own failure? How can it become able to articulate the nature of that failure? Furthermore, if the anthropologist initiates the project facing the risk of failure, it is on the basis of his or her hope that the project will be successful. Only with this hope would one become willing to stake an important part of one's own life on this specific effort.*

Dwyer 1982, 272

*...a particularly attractive combination, perhaps impossible to explain, of empathy and difference...*

Dwyer 1982, xvi<sup>119</sup>

This chapter traces several intersecting stories, tied together in difficult knots, like tangled yarn, or, as Oaxacans like to say, like *quesillo político*. Quesillo is the Oaxacan word for their famous Oaxacan cheese, which are sold in the markets and on the streets, in thick white ribbon of dairy yarn wrapped into tangled balls of yarn. But in order to make quesadillas out of it and eventually reach its hidden end, one has to untangle it and cut its ribbons into smaller pieces. The ribbons of quesillo in this story are a tangle of intersecting political processes and voices, including my own. This ball of quesillo is the coming together of several ribbons: the collective efforts of a diverse cast of activists and organizations engaged in memory work in Oaxaca around the 2006 uprising, including victims of state violence and NGOs; a vocal movement led by victims and survivors of violence, focused on reversing the incommensurable crisis of violence that

---

<sup>119</sup> Kevin Dwyer, *Moroccan Dialogues: Anthropology in Question / Muhammad, Faqir*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).



was becoming a “national crisis;” and that half-forgotten ghost ship, one of many lingering stories of violence and impunity amidst this surge of tragedies: the story of Oaxaca’s Loxicha prisoners. One final ribbon is that of my own story within this tangle of stories. Each of these stories and struggles, which I participated in directly or in solidarity, became my “fieldsites.” And it was the tangle of political *quesillo*, with its unforeseen twists and turns, that led me to my main dual sites in San Agustín Loxicha and the Oaxaca state prisons of Ixcotel and Etlá.

In 2011, I moved to Oaxaca to undertake twenty-eight months of fieldwork, and found myself in search of a political home for an engaged historical anthropologist. Within a few weeks, I began working (as a volunteer) with La Universidad de la Tierra, an amorphous autonomist with a protean cast that leaned heavily Zapatista, with a broad repertoire of projects in Oaxaca City and communities in the Central Valleys. At first, I began attending “Unitierra’s” weekly action-seminars on autonomy, which were open to anyone. Eventually, I was working alongside a group of activists from Oaxaca and other parts of Mexico in a variety of projects. Part of my experience with Unitierra recalls echoes of the young Alberto Ulloa (chapter 1), in that I made myself useful to a political collective, partly, by having access to a car and making it available for collective projects. Although, to be safely noted, in contrast to Ulloa’s work with revolutionary groups in the seventies, Unitierra’s work is certainly not clandestine and is an explicitly non-violent and non-vanguardist flavor of Mexican radicalism.<sup>120</sup> For a time, I was basically working as Unitierra’s unofficial driver. But, casting aside any pretensions of “ethnographic authority,” I was happy to do the work, to participate, to listen, to observe. Working with Unitierra opened new doors and formed bridges for me, giving me access—as a *compa*, and only secondarily, and always openly, as a researcher—to a wide

---

<sup>120</sup> We should distinguish clandestinity from acts of civil disobedience, which can also involve actions that conflict with legality. Unitierra has been, at various moments, openly supportive of the latter, not least through its participation in the APPO.

network of activists, organizations, and movements in Oaxaca.

A cornerstone, at the time, of Unitierra's work was a series of ongoing free workshops on "eco-technologies;" however, their goals were multiple and nested: At face-value, we facilitated workshops in which we provided people (usually through sympathetic parishes and other neighborhood or community groups) the practical skills and experience to construct inexpensive ecological technologies, such as water filters, composting toilets, recycled construction materials, organic gardens, among a broad list of things, which were decided upon by each group. The idea was to disseminate tools for people to *autonomously* address some of their most basic needs—in communities facing severe water scarcity, limited access to potable water, increasingly contaminated environments and sources of food. But, perhaps more importantly, these "autonomous communities" workshops were designed to (hopefully) foster more collective action, collective discussion and cooperation in decision-making and problem solving—through the practice of small habitual gatherings (mini assemblies). The eco-technologies were an end in themselves, but they were also meant to be material replicators: meant to be shared, taught, and repeated amongst neighbors and the smallest nodes of community. I was admittedly no expert on any of these technologies; but I had a car, which was vitally useful. And I could communicate ideas, with varying levels of success. Moreover, the idea and the invitation was that anyone could do (or, in different capacities, be part) any part of it—the work, the facilitating—all it required was conversations and small gatherings with those around you. And, significantly, it implied building this grassroots infrastructure without having to look, or ask, or beg "up"—to a deeply corrupted state bureaucracy that strategically fomented dependence and deprivation, through conditioned social programs and "productive projects"—for access to essential elements of well-being (*buen vivir*) and dignity (including good water, good food, safety...). Yet the most significant, and most elusive objective behind these workshops was to grapple with what people throughout Mexico were recognizing, with increasing alarm, as a severe crisis around violence and youth. Ultimately, the

fundamental purpose behind offering these workshops and fostering these small practical gatherings was “to regenerate the social fabric” of communities fragmented by violence, displacement, and aggressive neoliberal development. We wouldn’t go in talking or asking about violence. But as soon as the topic emerged (and it always did), we kept it at the center of the discussion. The extent to which we succeeded in achieving these goals is far more difficult to gauge than it is to explain the intention.

Unitierra’s focus on violence and youth was to some extent preventive: to address the dearth of opportunities and collective support structures for young people that was proving to be fertile ground for organized crime in vast parts of the country. Oaxaca was not facing the same levels of rampant violence as other Mexican states afflicted by wars between cartels and the armed forces or yet faced a political and economic landscape as thoroughly infiltrated by organized crime. In Oaxaca, the most egregious and common uses of violence tended to be politically motivated, or related to conflicts over land and resources—between rural communities, and increasingly, between capitalist “mega-projects,” such as mining and wind farm corporations and organized opposition in fractured and polarized indigenous and peasant communities.

Around the time that I joined Unitierra, the Movimiento por la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad (MPJD) rapidly ballooned into the most significant social movement in the country for a time, gathering tens of thousands on the streets and in caravans, and giving a now booming and urgent voice to thousands of victims and survivors of violence, especially relatives of scores of people who were murdered or disappeared since President Felipe Calderón’s decision, in 2006, to combat the drug cartels with federal forces and the military. Thousands of *víctimas* in the MPJD decried this policy as absurd and its outcomes as barbaric, while rejecting the disdain and erasure of an official narrative that cast their dead loved ones, and hundreds of thousands unresolved homicides and disappearances, as “collateral damage” or “presumable criminals.”

Unitierra became a vocal and active supporter of the MPJD. Numerous other organizations and collectives in Oaxaca also responded to the MPJD's calls to actions, by organizing marches in the state capital and other public acts of solidarity with the peace movement.

Unitierra was echoing and responding to the MPJD's call for organized struggle in favor of peace with (social and economic) justice and dignity—including dignity for the dead and for those whose lives were scarred by death. At the same time, a large collective of victims of state violence during 2006 (COFADAPPO), along with a group of five or six NGOs and political organizations (who had variously participated in the APPO) began meeting in Oaxaca City, in order to strategize the creation of a truth commission about 2006, in conjunction with a public historical memory campaign about these events.

Soon, several more organizations, including Unitierra and Section 22 of the teachers union, joined the coalition, which took several names, before settling on Espacio Ciudadano por la Verdad y Justicia—nodding to the MPJD's name (at the behest of Unitierra) and to the language of truth commissions. Over the following six months, the Espacio organized numerous actions and events, including public installations in collaboration with ASARO, a political street art collective that formed in 2006, or the silent guerrilla installation of a commemorative plaque on the Zócalo rebaptizing the plaza and inscribing a passage about rebellion and repression in 2006. One of the *víctimas* was an architect: the plaque lasted there for years. And, largely through the influence of Unitierra, the Espacio took on the significant role of hosting the MPJD's large caravan through the states of southern Mexico, assuming the monumental task of organizing the logistics for a few hundred people to sleep, along with public venues,<sup>121</sup> and an agenda for a full day of marches, ceremonies, protests, and *testimonio*-centered rallies, while simultaneously trying to incorporate

---

<sup>121</sup> Section 22 provided shelter and several of the venues, along with sound systems, stages, and lighting for the events. Due in large measure to its command of resources and infrastructure—coupled with its (often embattled) internal democratic structures and historical tradition of solidarity—the teachers union remains a pillar of the Oaxacan left, enabling and reinforcing political movements well beyond the teachers themselves.

and advance the interests and goals of the Oaxacan organizations—which were multiple and sometimes conflicting.

Of course I said yes when my old friend Juchi, the anarchist *Muxe* playwright whom I introduced in the previous chapter, asked me if I wanted to join him on the first MPJD caravan through northern Mexico. He was going with some *compas*—relatives of the disappeared anarchist teacher, Carlos René Román Salazar (who was disappeared the night before I arrived in Oaxaca, on March 14, 2011)—after petitioning Section 22 for support in this venture. The teachers put up their new bus—emblazoned with its logo and the face of Lucio Cabañas and other revolutionaries on its back—along with a little retinue of union members who would support and chaperone us. We did the same thing several months later, joining the caravan through southern Mexico when it passed through Oaxaca (following the botched prison visit I describe in the preface). During and between the caravans I followed Carlos Rene’s sister and partner, at their invitation, documenting their passage through the caravan, interviewing them about Carlos René and about living with his loss, the brutal ontological uncertainty of a disappearance (as opposed to a known death). I took hundreds of photographs of enormous crowds and the hundreds of placards, signs and banners with the photographs of missing loved ones, floating over their heads like a gathering of ghosts, in celebrations of love and loss—in the vast majority of which you can spot the stenciled moustache and glasses of Carlos Rene’s face, floating above the heads of two somber Oaxacan women.

Within a few months of the southern caravan’s passing through Oaxaca, after a successful and promising series of public events and fruitful internal strategizing around the creation of a truth commission, the Espacio Ciudadano fell apart. Such are the failures inherent to political projects—and ethnographic ones. Soon after this, I reformulated my research project and began a slow process of *acercamiento* with the Loxicha prisoners in Ixcotel and Etna prisons and their support networks, which led me to live in San

Agustín Loxicha for a year. However, it was not merely the collapse of the Espacio that led to this decision, but rather a strange fixation on the silent and confusing sinews of a ball of political quesillo that led to Loxicha.

This chapter is, thus, part methodological reflection on the messy, and alternately awkward and exhilarating, process of actually finding a “site,” as well as that of finding a political home. This involves more than simply choosing a spot and throwing oneself into it; it is also a political, intellectual, and emotional process. As anthropologists Ruth Behar and Kevin Dwyer, among others, have observed, vulnerability is at the heart of ethnographic work.<sup>122</sup> Part of the challenge, then, is to grapple with this vulnerability—and in an opposite, but complementary move to the notion of “politics beyond the text,” part of the challenge becomes engaging with vulnerability on the page.

### **Espacio Ciudadano por la Verdad y Justicia en Oaxaca**

This piece centers around the story of the Espacio Ciudadano por la Verdad y Justicia en Oaxaca—the Citizen Space for Truth and Justice in Oaxaca (henceforth, “Espacio Ciudadano” or “Espacio”)—a coalition of activists and organizations in Oaxaca City that formed in 2011 to do work around memory, violence, and social justice. The group began as a campaign to form a truth commission to investigate state and political violence in Oaxaca, while supporting other movements similarly working on violence, memory and justice in Mexico. In this chapter I tell the story of the Espacio in some of its major keys, based on my direct participation in meetings and actions over several months in Oaxaca City in 2011. However, the central focus of this chapter is actually on one of the Espacio story’s minor keys: that which I call The Strangely Divisive Effect of “The Loxicha Case” Upon the Work of Activist Historical Memory in Twenty-

---

<sup>122</sup> Ruth Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996); Dwyer, *Moroccan Dialogues*.

First Century Oaxaca.

This minor story also becomes a major one for a minor actor: It is also the story of how I stepped into the Loxicha story by choosing to write my dissertation about it—a commitment that required becoming a strange sort of solitary sleuth and historical detective of silences. Yet it takes a village, as the saying goes, and this is no less true for ethnography, which can involve throwing oneself into myriad new social interactions, and forming new bonds, many debts, and a few dear friends, if one is lucky. Ethnography requires turning oneself into an ambulatory sponge-node at the fictional center of a very real web of social relations and fields of power. We use our bodies as its blunt instrument.

*El caso Loxicha.* “The Loxicha Case,” as activists and journalists would refer to it, had a strangely divisive effect on the Espacio Ciudadano. Within a movement set to generate social justice through historical memory work around (and opposed to) political violence (particularly around the 2006 APPO movement), here was a movement that seemed like a clear fit for the Espacio—an old lingering “case” known for its brutal violence, a lack of historical truth, and the presence/absence of long-term political prisoners in Oaxaca. What was it about this “Loxicha Case” of political prisoners and half-forgotten state terror that emboldened certain activists within the coalition—and, more broadly, in Oaxaca and a few other corners of Mexico and the world—yet deeply discomfort others, perhaps even most, on that high-profile roster of Oaxacan leftist activists?

I trace this minor key story of the “Loxicha effect” within the Espacio Ciudadano movement in several steps:

I previously narrated the episode of a botched solidarity visit outside the gates of Ixcotel Prison, where most of the Loxicha prisoners were currently held. The protest and solidarity visit was organized and led by one member of the Espacio Ciudadano, a longtime, though publicly spurned, advocate of the

prisoners—while it was silently subverted by other members of the coalition, including a respected leftist intellectual and members of the teachers union. As I explain narratively, the story is a good example of what Oaxacans jokingly call their *quesillo político*—that is, a tangled ball of “political Oaxacan (string) cheese”—involving a wide cast of actors and motives, contortions and sinews. I narrate this episode based on my personal experiences in the organization and performance of this botched demonstration, as well as conversations and interviews that I later held with various of the actors involved.

It was during the course of these events that I decided to shift the focus of my research from 2006 to 1996; that is, from how a major story of leftist struggle and political violence in Oaxaca became history and memory. Moreover, it demonstrates how later movements, such as the Espacio, then mobilized around this history, turning the memory of it into political action—from that to this half-forgotten, minor story of leftist struggles that made some of those same memory activists so uncomfortable, revealing this history to be a discomfiting one for the left in Oaxaca (with its reflections at the national level, and beyond). The term “Loxicha case” deceptively suggested something simple, yet it occluded a deeply complex silenced history.

Aside from the botched prison demonstration episode, I present pieces of dialogue from my interviews and conversations with members of the Espacio who took up different positions towards the Loxicha case in our work. In this respect, part of what I am doing is examining the sometimes fraught relationship between the Loxicha case and Oaxacan leftist (mostly male) intellectuals, who were well represented in the Espacio. I also examine some of their reactions and expressions regarding my decision to investigate “the Loxicha case.” By reflecting on some of these early conversations about it—not only those opposed—but also those with (mostly female) activists and intellectuals in Oaxaca at this time, my reasons for undertaking this research project will also become apparent. In this sense, these conversations also allow me to reflect on the path that eventually led me to spending many hours over many days and months of regular visits to Ixcotel and Etna prisons interviewing the Loxicha prisoners, and to living in San Agustín



Loxicha for a year.

## **Silences**

The one thing that was hardly ever mentioned when talking about the Loxicha case was the act of rebellion. It was as though it were still too hot to touch that word, either because there were still prisoners or, for some leftists, because that act of rebellion, of which they were accused and which they denied, was somehow tainted by the implication of armed violence, and its association (in the accusations of the state, we might note, if (almost) never in the words of the prisoners or their allies) with the often reviled Popular Revolutionary Army.

## **Looking Backwards: Conversations with Gustavo and Vicente**

During the time that I was participating in the Espacio Ciudadano por la Verdad y Justicia en Oaxaca, and its dual efforts to propel the creation of a truth commission and to support the peace movement (MPJD), I spoke with another organizer there. Vicente was an influential member of a respected NGO that supported anti-mega projects (particularly around mining and dams) as well as internal community processes, such as assemblies.

As noted earlier, some members of the coalition expressed clear discomfort with bringing the Loxicha case under the purview of a hypothetical truth commission, or with public advocacy around the Loxicha prisoners, such as the failed visit in October of 2011. Some, including the Gustavo Esteva, the director of Unitierra, were also vocally opposed to my conducting research on the Loxicha story. Esteva, for instance, argued that this line of inquiry would generate nothing productive for “the Oaxacan movement,” because it was backwards looking, politically, not just historically. Esteva was emphatically dismissive and

condemning of the radical armed left in Mexico—and especially of the EPR, which he sentenced was infiltrated by the state and designed to be a trojan horse for the left, from the start. Moreover, at the local level, in San Agustín Loxicha, if I were to scratch the surface of memory, all I would find was “*el horror*”; that is, internecine violence and politically demobilizing cycles of vengeance. As evidence of the EPR’s infiltration by the state and of the futility of its tactics, he recalled his time as an advisor to the state governor, Diódoro Carrasco Altamirano, at the time of the EPR uprising; around then, he recalled, Carrasco (one of the main architects of the repression in Loxicha, as governor and then as Secretario de Gobernación (Minister of the Interior) under President Ernesto Zedillo) took him aside in one of his offices, and pointed to a large wall map of the state of Oaxaca. On the map, he recalled, were marks indicating every location where the EPR was active—this, before the guerrillas had even made their first public appearance.

But why would large portions of indigenous communities choose to join such a movement at some point? I pressed the question. “That organization never had support among indigenous communities,” came his response and an end to a conversation that only raised more questions. Yet other members of the group, such as Vicente, were supportive of this endeavor and offered valuable insight in that direction.

At the offices of EDUCA in the Colonia Reforma in Oaxaca City, not far from the Unitierra house, Vicente was encouraging of my proposal to carry out historical memory work around Loxicha and its political prisoners. Vicente also provided me with a crucial point of contact in the community, that of the local parish priest, which in turn opened other doors for me in the community. EDUCA’s good reputation with the priest and left leaning Xiche catechists in Loxicha also proved to be a vital credential for me when I first arrived in Loxicha. EDUCA had previously collaborated with the parish and its activist catechists in a series of workshops focused on strengthening community assemblies and norms in Loxicha. Ultimately, the catechists—and eventually, my dear friends—Elvira and Diana, decided to welcome me and to support my work because they felt that it was meaningful and that it fit with their own values and priorities. Yet I might

never have gotten the opportunity to explain my proposal to them, or gained their immediate trust (enough, at least, to open their doors and hear me out) without the help of Vicente and his permission for me to use his name in introducing myself to them.

*Hace falta trabajar la memoria histórica del caso Loxicha, porque todavía hay presos—o sea que no hay verdad formal, ni hay verdad jurídica.*

“We do need to work on the historical memory of the Loxicha case—because there are still prisoners, which means there’s an absence of formal truth, and an absence of juridical truth.” This is how I would remember our conversation in the notes I transcribed later that evening in early October 2011. “We do need to know more about the Loxicha case,” explained the veteran Oaxacan activist.<sup>123</sup> However, he also cautioned that an investigation would require looking into “the time of the informers” (*la etapa de los entregadores*)—that which Esteva had referred to as “*el horror*”: A time that now belonged, in memory, to the snitches and the Judas; a time marked by a wave of wild accusations among neighbors and finger-pointing of real or, more often, invented subversives. Vicente explained that this wave of internecine violence and paramilitarism, which followed the occupation of Loxicha by the military and other armed forces in 1996, devolved into a general “paranoia,” as well as “a denial of the past.”

Another major difficulty that I would encounter in investigating the Loxicha case, Vicente went on to explain—at least as an engaged researcher (or politically engaged actor of any kind)—was the absence of any (official or formal) political actor that the majority of the community of Loxicha would “recognize” as “legitimate”—and it was the same amongst the prisoners. According to Vicente, in the aftermath of the post-1996 repression, a schism (“*un rompimiento*”) now existed between “the old political leaders,” the Loxicha

---

<sup>123</sup> Vicente: It would be useful to investigate the role of teachers in the Loxicha movement, for instance, particularly a couple of the secretaries general of Section 22 during the 1980s, such as Enrique Rueda Pacheco and Erangelio Mendoza.

communities, and their social movements. “Even Juan”—the former political prisoner and longtime “official” advocate for the prisoners, and main organizer of the botched protest at Ixcotel Prison—had “a long tail to step on.”

In actuality, Vicente argued, the old forces of “the Loxicha movement” have devolved into a battle for political power between the two strongest political parties in the region, the PRI and the PRD—not to mention other organizations operating in the communities. In recent years, during municipal elections “bloody battles have taken place between the PRI and the PRD in Loxicha.” This happened in spite of the fact that, technically, the municipality of Loxicha is governed according to “*usos y costumbres*,” and official political parties are supposed to be forbidden from participating in or influencing local elections.

The prisoners were also divided among themselves, and none of their public advocates on the outside possessed broad legitimacy; thus making it unadvisable for me to attempt going through them in order to establish contact with the prisoners or with members of the community. Vicente recalled that, in 2009, a group of them, nearly all—led by a prisoner they called “*Comandante Ticher*”—<sup>124</sup> decided to publicly “break things off” with Israel Ochoa Lara and with Juan Sosa Maldonado, their longtime legal defender and public advocate, respectively. In a press conference, the prisoners announced that they would henceforth get their legal advice from Father “Uvi,” a respected leftist priest in Oaxaca who was also the head of a human rights organization. Yet, several years later, he was uncertain of where the relationship between Father Uvi and the prisoners stood—with good reason.

At the height of the Loxicha crisis in the late nineties and early 2000s, the prisoners and their lawyer, Israel Ochoa, collaborated closely with LIMEDDH, a human rights organization which had “an aura,” historically, of maintaining silent, cautious links to armed movements on the left, even when no other

---

<sup>124</sup> “Comandante Teacher” was the nickname given to Alvaro by the reporters, at the height of the Loxicha arrests, a moniker they lifted from the police reports and press releases at the time of Alvaro’s arrest in 1997.

human rights defenders would go anywhere near cases associated with charged of *eperrismo* or other armed militancy.

Finally, Vicente noted that in my research on the Loxicha case it would be worthwhile to consider the role of the Catholic Church in the Loxicha movement.<sup>125</sup> It would also be wise, he added, to speak with the parish priest in San Agustín Loxicha, Fidel Zurita. And with that, Vicente finally arrived at a figure that he felt comfortable suggesting as an initial point of contact in the communities of Loxicha. EDUCA had once facilitated a series of workshops around “citizen participation” in the region, and they had established trust.

The best way for me to go forward with my investigation and seek out points of entry into the world of the prisoners and the communities of Loxicha, Vicente advised, would be to try to proceed from spaces that were not associated with any of the well-known political groups. In other words, not through Juan, not through the teachers union, and not through the municipal authorities in Loxicha. And once I established myself in the community, he wisely suggested, at least in the beginning, it would probably be safest for me not to begin with “thorny questions,” but to go in with the theme of historical memory, more generally.

### **Victims and Reparations: Conflicts in the Espacio**

A few excerpts from the minutes of the Espacio Ciudadano meeting on December 8, 2011 offers vivid descriptions of the debates among these activists and victims of state violence, and of the issues they were grappling with. It also provides telling examples of evocations of the Loxicha case among the

---

<sup>125</sup> The Catholic Church played a crucial role in supporting the Mayan communities and organizations behind the uprising of the EZLN, during its ten years of silent inception after 1984, as well in the years following the 1994 uprising. Such was not the case in Loxicha during the emergence of its “democratic and clandestine” social movement during the same period. See Carlos Tello Díaz, *La rebelión de las Cañadas*, Cal y arena; Variation: Cal y arena. (México, D.F.: Aguilar, León y Cal, 1995); June C. Nash, *Mayan Visions: The Quest for Autonomy in an Age of Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2001); Adela Cedillo, “El fuego y el silencio: historia de las Fuerzas de Liberación Nacional mexicanas (1969-1974)” (Ediciones Pirata, 2008).

members of this collective.

In early December 2011, members of the Espacio Ciudadano called an emergency meeting in order to mediate a conflict among two of its constituent organizations. Conflict had erupted during a press conference when one organization of victims of state violence in 2006 threatened to expose the members of another organization of victims, both members of the Espacio. The former accused the latter of having received monetary *indemnizaciones* from the state government, ostensibly as reparations for violence at the hands of state agents in 2006, but effectively selling out the movement and the possibility of real justice. The disgruntled group threatened to reveal the names of those who had taken this money from the government. The latter, in turn, denied the accusation of sell-outs, and charged the former group with exposing them to further harassment and the possibility of further violence, by revealing their names, and thus re-victimizing them all over. Less than a year after its creation, this would be one of the final meetings of the Espacio, which imploded soon after under the pressure of this seemingly irresolvable conflict.

### **At the Gates of Ixcotel**

We were in a state of confusion. About a hundred protestors were gathered at the gate of Ixcotel Prison, Oaxaca's Central State Penitentiary, holding little over two thousand inmates: a complex of concrete walls encrusted in an urban neighborhood on the Isthmus-bound periphery of Oaxaca City, between the nearby centers of old Indian towns now overgrown with concrete, the Pan-American Highway, and the sprawling swath of partly forested federal land where the 38th Regiment of the Mexican Army is garrisoned. The high green walls of the restricted military grounds are conjoined to the complex of concrete walls of the prison, its administrative buildings and perimeter wall. From the highway, one cannot see the prison, the cluster of blocky two-storied buildings fuse into the cityscape of unevenly paved winding streets

lining working class houses, apartments, small businesses.

The protestors stood restlessly outside the gates of Ixcotel crowding the narrow street dotted with potholes and lined with eucalyptus trees, dividing and connecting the shabby prison complex and the hilly cityscape and working class neighborhood around it. The protest outside Ixcotel prison was one of several demonstrations, marches, and rallies taking place that day in connection with the arrival of the "Southern Caravan" of the Peace Movement led by poet Javier Sicilia: a retinue of thirty-odd buses traveling across southern Mexico to denounce the government's catastrophic drug war, with marches, rallies, and speeches at each stop along the way, as well as prominent stages for victims of violence to speak out and pronounce public testimonials. They had arrived the night before and would only be in Oaxaca for a day.

The peace movement (Movimiento por la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad, MPJD) was having its moment; Sicilia was in the news almost daily. It was the biggest thing happening, and local organizations were keen to take advantage of the moment: by drawing the attention of the itinerant activists and their retinue of accompanying reporters and journalists toward local issues; possibly procuring a meeting with Sicilia, or a comment from him regarding their issue. Yet also by expanding networks, blending political platforms, attempting to influence the discourse and actions of this movement that held the attention of the left, the independent media, and even the president.

In Oaxaca as elsewhere, even those who didn't fully embrace, or even opposed, much of Sicilia's platform were aware of the opportunity created by the Peace Movement's cache and media presence, as the caravan came through. Early that morning hundreds of caravanners joined local activists and organizations in a political-spiritual ceremony in the middle of the ruins of Monte Albán, the Zapotec city at the crest of a short mountain southwest of Oaxaca City. While most lingered around the Zocalo at these events, several dozens of people accepted an open invitation from local activists to join a protest outside of Ixcotel prison to demand the liberation of a group of indigenous political prisoners.

After a short march from the highway to the prison gates, led by Ameglio, a leader of the Peace Movement and JSM, who walked flanked by five or six indigenous women holding a banner demanding freedom for the Loxicha prisoners—they led about one or two hundred activists to the gates of the prison: the ultimate goal was the freedom of the prisoners. But the immediate goal was to procure a meeting between a small commission of protestors and activists to enter the prison and visit the prisoners, convey the Peace Movement's solidarity and that of all Oaxacan civil society. Hours passed and the dwindling crowd began sitting, though some brave ones kept chanting. The protestors assembled there that September day at noon outside of Ixcotel prison consisted of a mixture of activists traveling on the Caravan for Peace Pt. II and local activists and organizations, including teachers and others.

Juan Sosa, a one-time spokesperson for the prisoners and leader of the OPIZ in its second iteration as a human rights organization, had lobbied hard to bring Sicilia to the event outside Ixcotel. Sosa's influence and clout amongst the prisoners had deteriorated in the recent years—most of the remaining prisoners disavowed him as their spokesperson or representative in a public letter in 2009—yet Sosa adamantly continued his public campaign calling for the release of the prisoners and justice for victims and perpetrators of state violence in Loxicha.

Earlier that day a small controversy over the Loxichas flared when Javier Sicilia, the leader of the Peace Movement failed to join the group of protestors going to the prison. Sosa, a self-proclaimed human rights activist and lawyer who was once a political prisoner accused of being in the EPR, was vocal about his feeling of being snubbed by Sicilia, and his anger was visible as he assembled the small group of women in sandals and cheap clothes in a central street hours after the event. If he could get Sicilia by his side during the protest outside Ixcotel, in the presence of hundreds of caravan supporters and the media—better yet, if he and Sicilia could lead a small commission of delegates from the Peace Movement into the prison, in a show of solidarity with the prisoners—Sosa hoped he could once again bring the Loxicha case into the



limelight, draw the attention of media and perhaps government officials. Brokering such an alliance, however fleeting, could be a great boon to the cause—Sosa knew well the connection between visibility and political will—and it would bring prestige to him and his organization if he were seen as the one who brokered this alliance.

Outside the gates of Ixcotel a standoff ensued, predictably enough, between the prison authorities and the protestors demanding that a handful of them be allowed into the prison to visit the Loxicha political prisoners. The activists from the caravan were unfazed—minor disputes erupted between activists and police or local officials at nearly every stop along the way of the caravan—so they chanted louder at the police, hoping they could be heard over the prison walls—certain that with enough pressure, the police would relent to a commission entering. Hours passed and the sun beat down upon concrete and straw hats, but the impasse held. Those nearest the gate could overhear Sosa talking on a cell phone, speaking with one of the six Loxicha prisoners within, trying to broker a meeting; and they could see him and one of the caravan leaders negotiating with prison officials who would emerge from inside the prison from time to time to parlay a message. The protestors could endure discomfort—there is a certain jubilation and collective effervescence that can animate a purposeful crowd. But they became frustrated, uncertain how to react, when a lawyer for the teachers union addressed the crowd in order to read a letter on behalf of the prisoners.

After hours of facing off with the police with their bodies and chants, they are confused by this unexpected outcome: The prisoners they are there to fight for have sent a letter (via the lawyers of their hosts in Oaxaca, the teachers union), stating that they will not receive the caravan, because they had not been consulted in advance, expressing weariness at being exhibited “como en un escaparate”, as in a shop window, used by outside movements for their own political agendas and “spiritual comfort.”

They are there to speak out for "political" prisoners in the face of corrupt authorities, yet those same

prisoners have just issued a letter via those very authorities dismissing the movement and disavowing the local activist (JSM) who led the protestors there. Furthermore, the letter was delivered along with another letter from their lawyers at the teachers union—even though the teachers union is one of the main organizers of the days' events (they even provided shelter at their facilities for the itinerant activists during their two-night stay in Oaxaca). Why would the local organizing committee, including the teachers union, approve the event at the prison (organized in advance and widely publicized as one of the day's main events)?

As the bureaucrat read the letter, he stood next to Juan Sosa, Pietro Ameglio (of the peace movement), and a couple of other local activists who had headed the protest (including the daughter of one of them, F.?). On the other side of him, six or seven heavily armed state police watched silently, cradling shotguns and rifles. All of them were on the inside of the draw-gate (*pluma*) of the prison security checkpoint, which divided them from the mixed crowd of protestors clustered together under straw peasant hats and baseball caps and umbrella-shades.

The lawyer finished reading the letter and handed the battery-powered bullhorn back to Sosa. At that moment people began shuffling to face each other, hands gesturing, brows creasing, a murmur filling the air above their heads and people. But Sosa didn't miss a beat: As soon as he held the bullhorn once more, he began speaking into it, more vigorously now. This baffling situation, he exclaimed, was nothing other than an insidious betrayal by the teachers union, a vile, underhanded move proving that the union's leadership had been fully corrupted and coopted by the state. The union brought them all here, he continued to exclaim, in order to pretend that they were on the side of the prisoners—but as soon as they were there, ready to fight for the prisoners' liberty and prepared to visit these helpless victims—they turn their backs on all of them, on the prisoners and their noble advocates gathered there that day.

Sosa was livid, but went on yelling into the bullhorn as though nothing had happened, as though the letter they had just heard represented nothing more than another roadblock put in place by the state in order

to prevent the protestors from visiting the prisoners. Now his attacks included the leadership of the teachers union, which he labeled as traitors and government sell-outs. His anger mounted on top of that which he was already feeling at being slighted by Javier Sicilia, who rejected his insistent entreaties to join them at the prison event, sending Pietro Ameglio in his place.

Ameglio for his part was clearly among the befuddled, and he aired his annoyance at the teachers union's meddling as well, though his words were softer and more diplomatic than Sosa's. By that evening's closing event at the Zócalo, Ameglio had changed his tune, after conferring with Sicilia and some of the local organizers: In a notable reversal, Ameglio no longer denounced the teachers, calling instead for unity and dialogue amongst the organizations. Later that evening Sosa went on stage and publicly lambasted the powerful teachers union and its lawyers and basically calling it a plot against the Loxicha cause. It was one of many local upsets that the caravan encountered on its journey through southern and southeastern Mexico. However, it was one in a link of this sort of thing with the Loxichas.

### **Espacio Ciudadano: After the Failed Ixcotel Visit**

In the days and weeks following the Southern Caravan's passage through Oaxaca and the abortive prison visit to Ixcotel, the host organizations within the Espacio Ciudadano coalition met several times to assess the successes and failures and prospects of the events surrounding the caravan. This is a sample of the minutes from one of those meetings, consisting of anonymized voices (except in a few cases where the speaker's identity was necessary, such as Juan Sosa), captured and paraphrased by the evening's designated note-taker:

*Sosa—writes the note-taker—points out that he reached out to Álvaro for them [the prisoners] to make the necessary arrangements. By “que hicieran la gestión,” Sosa means that he asked Álvaro to submit*

a formal petition (in the form of a handwritten letter) addressed to the director of the prison—but that he [Alvaro] made no mention of his [intended] refusal to receive the caravan. But neither does the response from Section 22 [of the teachers union] foster a resolution of the conflict between the two sides. Sosa invokes two sides, rhetorically *flattening* the ball of *quesillo*, that is, a politically complicated situation he had just described and turning it into a story of two sides: the teachers union (effectively standing as a proxy for the state in Sosa’s telling) on one hand, and on the other himself, the prisoners, and the Good Left, present company included. Sitting across the room from him was Gustavo Esteva, an autonomist left intellectual and former adviser to the Zapatistas, who had swayed the caravan’s symbolic figurehead, the poet Javier Sicilia, away from accepting Juan Sosa’s invitation to visit the Loxicha prisoners in Ixcotel penitentiary. Esteva and Sicilia were old friends; in their youth both were part of a cohort of disciples of the Austrian autonomist (?) philosopher Ivan Illich, during the latter’s days as an aging autonomist guru in Cuernavaca in the 1970s.

Esteva and Sosa represented two very different faces of the left in Oaxaca, although they both sat at the same room and collaborated on political initiatives, at least putatively. Esteva straddles various worlds, including elite circles of Oaxacan and Mexican society, as well as cosmopolitan radical leftist circles, including elements of the EZLN and its networks of support or affinity in and beyond Mexico. Esteva’s politics, and those of his acephalous organization (a contradiction in terms after “his”) space, Unitierra, were squarely on the side of neo-Zapatista ethos and non-violence. The Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity and its caravan led by Sicilia, with its forceful usage of non-violence and testimony to confront violence, the astounding violence that was currently shaking Mexico—this movement fit like a ring on Esteva’s finger: it was echoing loudly across Mexico: the Zapatistas had come out in support of it, and hundreds of thousands had come out onto the streets to heed Sicilia’s call of protest: another “Ya basta!” Esteva therefore had a clear vision of what he wanted for the MPJD caravan’s stay in Oaxaca and its wide

media coverage and “poder de convocatoria.” He wasn’t about to let a backward-facing Communist ruin it. Sosa came from a different Oaxaca and a different left than Esteva’s.

### Conversation with Adela Cedillo

Between 2011 and 2013, during the time that I was living in Oaxaca and beginning my research on “the Loxicha case,” I met on several occasions with my friend and colleague, Adela Cedillo, a fellow Chilanga (someone from Mexico City) studying in the United States. By the time I met her, Adela was already renowned in Mexico as a social historian and an expert on the histories of the radical left, armed movements, and state violence in Mexico, particularly the second half of the twentieth century. In addition to her groundbreaking research on the Fuerzas de Liberación Nacional (FLN), the urban guerrilla precursors of the Zapatistas, among other subjects,<sup>126</sup> Adela was also known for her advocacy, among other things, on behalf of victims of state terror in Mexico, such as the thousands of *desaparecidos* from the Mexican government’s war against the revolutionary left since the 1960s, and their families.

In late 2011, we exchanged a series of messages in which I informed her about my participation in the Espacio Ciudadano and its campaign for truth and justice in Oaxaca, including the establishment of a truth commission, and also of my decision to place the Loxicha story at the center of my fieldwork. The following is an excerpt from her responses:

*That whole situation with the Loxichas makes me shudder; it was a brutal episode of counterinsurgency, before which the NGOs closed their eyes, thanks to the cunning distinction that the government introduced between a “good guerrilla” (the EZLN) and a “bad one” (the EPR). Obviously, then, [on the part of NGOs,] every effort was channeled into supporting the former; meanwhile, there are Loxichas who bear the disgraceful record [among political prisoners] of fifteen years in prison. Surely you know the story better than I do, but what I can tell you is that, if you asked me, had a single one of the major NGOs set out to defend them from the beginning, it*

---

<sup>126</sup> Cedillo, “El fuego y el silencio : historia de las Fuerzas de Liberación Nacional mexicanas (1969-1974)” ; Adela Calderón Cedillo and Fernando Calderón, eds., *Revolutionary Struggles and the Dirty War, 1964-1982* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

would be long since they were free.

*But, you know, unlike in 2006 [in Oaxaca], in '96 there was a siege of silence<sup>127</sup> surrounding this topic: neither journalists nor academics pursued it. Therefore, a truth commission is of fundamental importance—although not a decoy<sup>128</sup> one like those that have come before—yet that requires a great deal of lobbying (and intrigue),<sup>129</sup> as well as guidance and support from international human rights NGOs.*

Adela then offered helpful suggestions for pursuing archival and documentary sources related to the Oaxacan conflicts in 1996 and 2006. She also suggested that in order to place these conflicts in historical context, it was worth considering the Oaxacan social movement that overthrew Governor Zárata Aquino in 1977—“because certain conditions and actors reappear [in the 70s and in ‘96/‘06], for instance, the Canseco-Martínez family and some alleged *PROCUPs*; and, on the opposite side, some of the characters involved in the counterinsurgency. The AGN [National Archive] contains a lot of this information. . .”.

She ended with a note lamenting the death of Nepomuceno Moreno, a man I met briefly during the north and south caravans of the MPJD. Among the hundreds of victims of violence that accompanied the caravans and spoke out during the testimonial events along each stop of the caravans, he became one of the better known voices and faces. His son was disappeared, and at every event carried a sign reading, “Authorities of Sonora: Where are our children?” Following the caravans, he was selected as one of a handful of victims that were permitted (by the government) to participate in the controversial televised summit meeting that took place on October 14, 2011, between President Felipe Calderón (2006-2012), progenitor of the war on cartels that began in 2006, and the MPJD, led by the poet Javier Sicilia. One of the MPJD’s conditions for participating in the encounter with Calderón was that victims be allowed to present their testimony before the cameras and the president, just as they had done during the caravan. “Don Nepo”

---

<sup>127</sup> “Un cerco de silencio.” Cerco can translate as a fence or a hedge, as well as a siege. I attempt to convey both meanings in my translation.

<sup>128</sup> “De patito”: a Mexican phrase signifying something a false imitation or a deceptive attempt.

<sup>129</sup> “Cabildeo,” refers to political lobbying, networking, legwork; it generally holds the connotation of “intrigue.”

was one of those voices of pain and loss that spoke that day. Days later, he was assassinated in broad daylight in Hermosillo, Sonora.

### **Jean Le Costaud**

I met Jean Le Costaud at a meeting of activists, teachers, and academics on the topic of *comunalidad*, in reference to the concept of “communality” developed by Zapotec and Mixe intellectuals since the 1980s. Actually, I met Jean after the meeting, as some of the meeting participants gathered for late afternoon lunch at a *carnes a la parrilla* place not too far from the building, the pedagogy unit of the teachers union, where the meeting had just taken place. Jaime Luna, the anthropologist and eminent Zapotec intellectual from Guelatao, was there, as was his protege and community radio pioneer, Arturo. Together, this meeting had drawn together many important and respected figures from activist and cultural circles that bridged Oaxaca City and the Sierra Norte—the Sierra Madre mountains to the north and northeast of Oaxaca City, which are home to Zapotec and Mixe communities, among others. Jaime and Arturo, and many others, generously offered whatever help they could, as I was trying to relocate my research project to San Agustín Loxicha, in the Sierra Sur. As it turns out, doing fieldwork in the Sierra Norte and in the Sierra Sur are very different ventures. Links such as these at the *Academia de la comunalidad* were far fewer in the Sierra Sur.

Over carnitas, I struck up a conversation with the man across the table from me, who was Jean. He was a retired schoolteacher from France, who had lived many years in north Africa. Solidarity with the indigenous movement brought him to Chiapas and Mexico many years ago, and he had stayed with his pension and his activism. He asked me about the path that brought me there, too. I told him about my ongoing research on memory and politics and its new focus on the case of the Loxicha political prisoners. Then he surprised me when he cautiously mentioned that he had a contact from Loxicha here in the city—a

former prisoner.

“But don’t be surprised, if you meet them and they don’t tell you anything”—he said, referring to questions about Loxicha’s history of political violence, repression, or activism—“or if you go there and they don’t show you anything. That which is not spoken is not necessarily forgotten. It’s like blank areas on a map. There, you can’t or mustn’t walk. Or they can’t or won’t show it to you. But it doesn’t mean that there’s nothing there—it’s that there’s too much.”

As people finish eating, some start lighting cigarettes, and the conversation is always politics: the teacher sitting next to me, la Maestra Marisol, lights a cigarette and feels the need to confess. She tells us that she picked up smoking in 2006—and we’re all interested and cheerful and in solidarity now, before she’s even explained—and it’s because during the uprising, at the barricades, all the other teachers were smoking and the *barrikaderos* (barricade youths). “Because of the cold, because of nerves, because of everything!” Then she throws in a jab at the ex-governor, Ulises Ruiz (2004-2010), which the APPO sought to depose: “Ulises is even guilty of *that* [making me pick up smoking]!”<sup>130</sup> Which makes everyone around laugh. Then another teacher, whom Maestra Marisol bummed her cigarette from, interjected, “you should tell who ever taught you to smoke to also teach you to buy your own,” and everyone laughs again, before moving the discussion in another direction.

## Why Loxicha

When I went to Loxicha in May of 2012 I arrived with a bold research plan, yet also with great uncertainty. I had been living in Oaxaca for a year, and had spent several months there in recent summers, in order to carry out research for my dissertation in anthropology and history. Yet after a year of investigating

---

<sup>130</sup> “¡Por el frío! ¡por los nervios! ¡por todo! Hasta de eso tiene la culpa Ulises!”



one of the hottest political issues in Oaxaca in recent years—the 2006 uprising of the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca—my experiences among different organizations and political spaces in Oaxaca had convinced me to shift the specific focus of my investigation, around the APPO and its aftermath, to a different story of conflict, rebellion, and repression, while retaining many of my overarching questions and foci—a minor key story looming in the background of a major one.

As I describe in the preface, it was my experience participating in a series of discussions and activities among a group of leftist political organizations seeking to create a truth commission to investigate state violence in 2006. In the course of these activities, starting in the summer of 2011, members of this coalition attempted to incorporate the issue of Loxicha and its prisoners into the purview of the future truth commission and of the coalition’s broader memory work (including the failed prison visit that I describe in the preface). My ears and eyes were tuned towards the question of how political activists and social movements were using historical memory as a means of infusing meaning into contemporary political projects, or making historical memory a political project in its own right, such as the creation of a truth commission (and many other examples). However, I was frustrated by how overwrought discourses around the APPO were; yet I was deeply struck by the way in which certain influential members of this truth-and-justice coalition bristled at the different attempts to bring the case of the prisoners (back) into our discussions and our practices of solidarity, particularly around the failed prison visit, during the MPJD’s caravan through Oaxaca in October of 2011. All of this led me to re-orient my earlier focus from the APPO—a movement and history that seemed to be on everybody’s tongue, everybody had an opinion, and its legacy was still disputed and coveted—and, instead, focus my questions about politics and memory around a political history that many on the left were far less comfortable discussing or becoming associated with.

Why did the prospect of organizing public acts of solidarity with these longtime indigenous political prisoners make certain leftists so uncomfortable? Why, in trying to carry out truth-and-justice work in

Oaxaca, did some on the left prefer to leave this particular story out of the mix? What sort of stigma or toxicity did this history and its current manifestations carry, such that certain leftists pursuing historical memory work preferred casting it aside, rather than be associated with it? These were the first questions that struck my interest, as I embarked on this project. Others followed: The APPO movement was significantly marked by acts of empowerment and liberation that involved giving people a greater voice—i.e., taking over radio stations and opening the microphones to working class women who had never faced a camera before (See Stephen 2013). So too the burgeoning peace movement of 2011, which called for an end to the out-of-control violence unleashed by the war on drugs, was similarly defined by acts of memory work and giving voice. The caravan’s main activities on each of its stops involved opening a platform and microphone for victims of violence to give their testimony, by giving names and faces and histories to the masses of anonymous dead: tens of thousands of assassinated “criminals,” or in most cases, “collateral damage.” These were powerful acts.

On the other hand, this particular series of events and circumstances, surrounding the indigenous prisoners of Loxicha and the EPR uprising in 1996, seemed bogged down in silence, distrust, misinformation and confusion. Thus, the implications of pursuing research on historical memory around a stigmatized and controversial series of events and characters, presented unique questions and challenges distinct from those of a hot-ticket subject, such as the APPO.

-\*-

### **Interlude: Authority in Loxicha (Prison Bird Songs)**

It was a Wednesday morning in May, the last month of the dry season and the hottest of the year, when I walked up to cell 22, “la celda de los Loxichas,” with a bag of mangos and my pen and notebook inside my morral. Agustín Luna Valencia, as always, was sitting in the open patio outside the cell, on a tiny wooden chair, low to the ground, silently sewing baskets out of colorful thick plastic string and long coils of metallic wire, under the tin roof that the Loxichas built outside their cell to block the enormous Oaxacan sun and cover the three-tiered wooden altar, which they too built, for their images of la Virgen de Juquila, la Virgen de Guadalupe, and their other saints and icons. With his back to the wall, his girth and his silent composure, he conjured an image of a martyred Catholic Buddha.

Agustín Luna Valencia is a former mayor of San Agustín Loxicha. He spent twenty years in prison (1996-2016) for allegedly using municipal funds to support a guerrilla organization during his time as municipal president (mayor) of a mostly Zapotec town in one of the most impoverished regions of one of Mexico’s poorest states. He was sentenced to thirty-one years in prison, on charges that include homicide, terrorism, sabotage, conspiracy, theft, possession of military weapons—and the list goes on.

After six months of visiting the Loxicha prisoners in Oaxaca’s Central Penitentiary at Santa María Ixcotel, I found that there was little more “political testimony” that I could think to ask of Don Agustín, and little more that he could think to tell me. Yet I wanted to keep visiting, and he seemed to enjoy my company and my interest in his stories. So I thought to ask him about animals. I knew that he had a fondness for

animals and plants, because he had told me so, and this fact—that he had once loved caring for animals, and that for seventeen years (more than half my lifetime) he had not seen an animal, or the countryside, or his home—seemed crueler to me even than anything I knew. Knowing this, and having perhaps an inkling of what a bird could mean to a man in a cage, or what a deer might mean to someone who once lived among them, though now only in his remembrance, I asked him to tell me some stories about the animals of Loxicha. I asked almost no other questions while he spoke. And the following passages are some of what he told me.

The municipal palace, which he alludes to at the end of the story about the deer, is the seat of local government in San Agustín Loxicha, where Agustín himself served as municipal president (mayor) from January 1, 1996, until September 25 of that year. That day, he and every member of the cabildo were detained by the Mexican Army and taken to a military prison in La Crucecita Huatulco, where they were tortured and interrogated about what they knew of the Popular Revolutionary Army (EPR), a guerrilla organization that claimed responsibility for an attack on naval and police bases in Huatulco several weeks earlier, which resulted in the deaths of a dozen soldiers and police and three guerrillas. Among the latter group was a member of the cabildo of San Agustín Loxicha, who had gone missing several weeks earlier. Agustín and the other members of the cabildo were all charged with indirect participation in the attack and the deaths of the soldiers, which took place on the night of August 28—the date happened to coincide with Loxicha’s biggest fiesta of the year, the name day its patron saint, San Agustín Obispo, which was organized and presided over, like every year, by the municipal president. It was Agustín Luna’s first time officiating.

The military occupied Loxicha in September of 1996, yet it was the Judicial Police who played the largest role in hunting down supposed guerrilleros. The dozens of scattered towns and villages that make up Loxicha were then, as they are now, one of the poorest regions in one of Mexico’s most impoverished states. The judiciales, acting under the auspices and guidance of the Army, and led by the sanguine Lucio Vásquez,

a well known *pistolero* from Loxicha who went on to become municipal president, orchestrated a sweeping witch-hunt of guerrilleros, during which hundreds of Zapotecs were detained during night-time raids and sent to prison.



Figure 4. Municipal President Agustín Luna Valencia walks through the center of San Agustín Loxicha, 1996.<sup>131</sup>

*I always liked taking care of plants, taking care of animals. The animals that I kept most, the ones I most liked raising and cared for the most, were birds. As a boy, I had blue pigeons and later I had parrots too, in a cage. Perhaps that's why I'm the one in a cage now. Me encantaban esos animales. People would sell me those blue pigeons, or someone would give one to me. It is around this month (May) that they hatch.*

---

<sup>131</sup> Courtesy of Luna family.

*Some of my blue pigeons once got away from my mother. “They got away,” she said. But those are domesticated animals. So I went outside and there they were at the top of a tall tree. “What now?” I thought. What signs could I make to make them come back?*

*Near the river where herds of deer go to drink water, between Santa Catarina and San Agustín, there was a mango tree. One day, around eighty-two or eighty-three, as I was walking to San Agustín, I passed by the mangal and heard some parrots crying out—big parrots, and baby parrots too. Their nest looked like a shell; they were crying and crying, and I heard the cry of a baby parrot, but it was coming from the ground. It must have tried to fly and couldn’t, so it fell. But I saw it was alright—¡y se me hizo el antojo! I carried it on my finger, covering it with my other hand, since I had no scissors to clip its wings. And I took it to my suegros in Tierra Blanca San Vicente, where I kept some cages for my blue pigeons. But on my way back, I decided to take it back to Santa Catarina so it wouldn’t bother my suegros. “¡Contentos van a estar mis chamacos que les traigo un periquito!” I thought (and how grinned when he said this). So we clipped its wings, and we kept him well taken care of. We would feed him every morning, and at night we kept him in a large bule, which we’d cover with a sheet so it wouldn’t get cold. One morning, I said to my son, “apúrate, vamos a darle de comer a tu periquito.” And my son—he was little then; now he’s a teacher in San Marcial Ozolotepec—said to me, “he’s lying down, maybe he’s asleep.” “Cuál dormido,” I thought, he must have died. And sure enough, ya estaba tieso.*

*Some birds carry messages. When we were little, my parents—my abuelos, actually, would tell us about certain animals. What they do. What they say. Like birds. There is the pájaro chismoso. Those tiny birds come in groups, a bunch of them together; they come to the cafetal around the house. My abuelos would say that when those pajaritos come around, it’s not a welcome thing; it’s a bad sign, something negative, for oneself or for the family. Perhaps someone will arrive with a chisme—y sí pega, eh—we’ve*

*seen it happen. Maybe not right away, but the day after; a child may get sick, or someone else in the family. That's what they signal. Finding them on the path, en el campo, is different. That just means that someone is coming from the opposite direction, and it's usually true—se adelantan [de quien viene], y por eso se dice que son chismosos. They're funny little birds, a color between brown and gray, como del tamaño de un limón.*

*There is also the tecolote and the tecolute, which is smaller, and the lechuza. These owls fly at night, and one night they may come and perch themselves in the tallest trees around the house. When they do, they too are bringers of bad news—también son malos agüeros. If it sings once, twice, that's normal, it's nothing to worry about. But if it stays and keeps on singing, or if it returns night after night—then you know it's something bad. Someone in the family may die. Or someone may get sick.*

*These beliefs are true, and when people hear this singing, they know that they must protect themselves somehow. So some people will go see a saurín, a man who knows how to read the corn seeds—esos hombres que juegan con el maíz—reading its movements and patterns in a gourd. You ask the saurín, why has the tecolote been singing by my house at night? What should I do? And the saurín will consult the maize to try and decipher where the fault is. Normally, the solution will involve rezos—for four days. Of course, there are those who don't believe, and they simply say, “but those are nocturnal animals.” Before, children would catch a fever or a cough, but the abuelos couldn't take them to the doctor, because there were no doctors or clinics in the communitéis, so they would go to the saurín.*

*The correcaminos can also say something. Their color is between gray and white and black. They come out in the day. So you might be out, en el campo, walking between pueblos, and one will cross the path in front of you. They run fast. When this happens, it means that the outcome of your trip will not be positive. If you are on your way to town, to San Agustín, to buy construction material, as people do, or to look for someone—you will not find them.*

*There used to be very tall trees—I don't know if there are anymore, after these hurricanes—and<sup>132</sup> eagles used to rest on them. If you see one high in a tree with its breast pointing in the direction from which you came, your trip will have good results. But if has its back towards you as you come upon it—then your trip will be in vain. Or you will be too late. Something bad will happen. Son astutos esos animales, they can be sneaky, and you might see the eagle walking on a branch when, suddenly, it turns around.*

*When you are out en el campo, almost any animal that crosses the path in front of you is a mal agüero: a deer, a skunk, a snake—especially a big snake—juna culebrísima que se te cruza!*

*I remember when I was working as a teacher in Santa Catarina, around ninety-one, I would walk was six hours to San Agustín, three hours down to the Río Grande and three hours up. I would often see deer, but they wouldn't cross in front of me. One time I left around five in the afternoon with my family, en bestia (on donkey or mule), with a child under my arm, and two other teachers who were with us. We were going up the cerro when we saw a herd of deer going down to the river to drink and then back around the cerro. But this is nothing strange, they live there. It becomes a bad sign if it crosses your path, or if the animal comes up to the pueblo.*

*The deer is a very delicate animal. To hunt deer one has to be a very good shot. But one also has to be very prudent in order to avoid troubles. Not just anybody can shoot a deer. But if you are a hunter, and you know how to hunt deer, say that you shoot a deer—you take it home, you butcher it and you prepare it. You share it with your family and you share it with the people you know. But, if among those with whom you share it, there is a woman, and at one point you had an (extramarital) affair with that woman, then you will have problems the next time you hunt. You see, it's a gift from the Creator (to know how to hunt), and not*

---

<sup>132</sup> Hurricane Paulina, in 1997, and hurricane Carlota, in 2012, each devastated Mexico's south Pacific coast, including the states of Oaxaca and Guerrero. In Loxicha, where most houses are made of thin corrugated sheets, cardboard, wood or clay, hundreds of houses and roofs were blown away. No one I spoke with in Loxicha could remember a storm, prior to 1997, ever causing such damage as far inland as San Agustín, which ascend to almost 2,000 meters above sea level (approx. 6,000 ft.). Agustín, who was has been in prison since 1996, did not live through either of the two storms, but learned of their effects through his family and the radio.



*just anyone has it—so watch out next time you're in the campo, because if you shared this deer meat with your lover, the next time you hunt a deer, you may shoot it, and you make certain that you got it. Then you come near and you load it onto your shoulders. But once you have it around your shoulders, it will no longer be a deer; it will have become a snake, and it will wrap itself around you and strangle you.*

*Not only that: even if you hunt a deer, and you give someone else some of the meat, and that person has a lover, it will still affect you. Back in the campo, you will shoot the animal, but when you come near, it will be gone. Or it may run into a river, keeping only its nose above the water—son astutos esos animales. Yet when you walk up to it, all you find is a snake. It's less bad than if you're the one with the affair, but it still comes around.*

*These stories are true. This happened to a friend of mine, who has passed away. He went hunting with his son—one driving the deer and the other carrying an old rifle. The boy shot a deer, but didn't kill it. So they followed the trail of blood down to a river, and when they approached, they could see that the deer was no longer a deer, but a snake—¡una culebrísima!—and they were scared. The father knew how to read the maize, he was a saurín, and he said to the boy, “aquí hay una falta—something is amiss, and you must tell me the truth—do you have a lover?” “No,” the boy said. “Well, then you got away with just a susto, and it's possible that the man you last sold this meat to then shared it with his lover.” “We must pray,” he said. So they got on their knees and prayed together, keeping an eye that the animal didn't run away. Then he said, “you need to bathe,” so both of them bathed in the river in order to be protected. Lastly, they spoke to la madre tierra, with a prayer, they made their reverences and asked for permission to take the animal. After about an hour, the man walked up to the water and saw that the deer had once again become a deer. They hauled it out by its legs, it was already half dead. Pero sí le sacó un buen susto al muchacho. It may sound like a tall tale, but this is real. You can ask any older person in Loxicha and they will concur. These stories*

are true.<sup>133</sup>

*Just recently, my daughter told me that they saw a deer walk through the pueblo in San Agustín, and that it leapt—as you know, they like to jump—and it landed on the roof of the palacio municipal. Then it leapt again and fell (three flights down) to the street below. Ya quebrado, los municipales o los judiciales lo ocuparon para la botana—so, broken as it was, the judicial police who are stationed there at the palacio made a meal out of it. Still, it was a bad sign—and it’s not surprising, seeing as how things are right now in the pueblo.*<sup>134</sup>

*The same thing happened in ninety-six; before the fiesta del pueblo, some neighbors say they saw a deer cross in front of the palacio municipal and go down to the cafetales below. It was just few weeks later that we fell into the hands of the authorities, and they took us away.*

-\*-

---

<sup>133</sup> Agustín’s story is thoroughly heteroglossic, in that it merges testimonio, folk tale, and myth. See Bruce Mannheim and Dennis Tedlock, “Introduction,” in *The Dialogic Emergence of Culture*, ed. Dennis Tedlock and Bruce Mannheim (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995). For a discussion of the Mesoamerican deer hunter myth, elements of which are shared and performed among various Zapotec communities in the Sierra Sur, see “Appendix B2” in Beam de Azcona, “A Coatlán-Loxicha Zapotec Grammar,” 596–635.

<sup>134</sup> 2013 saw a precipitous rise in violence in Loxicha, possibly placing its homicide rate far above the national average. Here, as in many parts of rural Oaxaca, municipal election years are often marred by political violence. However, elections in Loxicha have been particularly gruesome since the late nineties, following the EPR scandal and military occupation. Annual federal and state appropriations for Loxicha, which until then were a pittance, have ballooned since 1997, swelling the fortunes of municipal presidents hence, and turning the municipal seat into a highly coveted political bounty. This in spite of the fact that Loxicha remains a “high marginality” municipality according to Mexico’s census bureau. Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI), “Censo de Población y Vivienda 2010,” 2010, <http://en.www.inegi.org.mx/proyectos/ccpv/2010/>.

## **Part II: Voices in a Silent War**

-\*-

## Prologue to Part II

### Ixcotel and Etna Prisons

Ixcotel and Etna prisons—low-security state penitentiaries on the outskirts of Oaxaca City—looked and felt very different from what one learns to expect from popular depictions of prisons in movies or TV shows, with their austere halls and rows of identical barred cells. And they were distinct from other medium or high security prisons in Mexico or the United States.<sup>135</sup> The first time I visited the interior of Ixcotel Prison, in 2012, my first impression was that it resembled a strange miniature town, where the bustling activity, movement, and noise coexisted with the stringent and punitive reality of incarceration.

Throughout the wide sun-drenched outdoor corridor along the perimeter of the prison, between the high rampart and the dormitory and inner structures of the prison, prisoners were walking, chatting, sitting on stools and working on basket weaving or sewing soccer balls, running errands for the guards, hustling, or moving between the outdoor basketball and soccer courts and the dormitories; prisoners were working in the carpentry workshop, operating a little barber shop, cooking and serving meals out of little eateries, just like those in the markets of the real town surrounding the prison; selling their handicrafts and wares from outdoor stalls between the basketball courts and a guard station. A bustling internal economy operated inside the prison, linking it to the outside, with money and products moving in and out of the prison. Most of the

---

<sup>135</sup> Granted, I've never been inside a prison in the US, although I know people who have; and, as the world's leading generator of prisons and prisoners, with the largest per capita prison population in the world, US prisons hold special influence over popular conceptions of prisons throughout the world.

soccer balls sold in the markets of the city, for instance, were made in these prisons. Yet, for all its seemingly unfettered movement and activity, it remained a prison—a concrete cage the size of large city block, with hundreds of cells and towering ramparts crowned with turrets occupied by guards holding shotguns or semi-automatic rifles. Ultimately, all of this movement remained oppressively segregated and coercive, with the vast majority of its population forcibly constrained, managed, and disciplined by a small minority of people—the prison authorities and guards—who controlled the space that they also intermittently inhabited. While prisoners enjoyed some limited mobility and access to employment or livelihood, these freedoms were proscribed and unevenly distributed among the prisoner population. In addition to the prison authorities, hierarchical self-governing structures of prisoners regulated and managed access to various spaces and occupations, like the carpentry workshop or food stalls, or sleeping spaces in the dormitories.

At the time of my fieldwork, Ixcotel was also a co-ed prison, with a smaller “women’s section” in one of the dormitories—until 2013, when all of the women were transferred to an all-women’s prison in Tanivet, near Tlacolula, about thirty minutes east. Several women also had infant children living with them inside the prison, some of which were born in the prison and allowed to stay with their mothers until they were no longer infants (sometimes up to three years of age or so).

Ixcotel Prison stands a few blocks from the Pan-American highway—adjacent to the restricted wooded grounds of the 28<sup>th</sup> Military Zone, Oaxaca’s main army barracks—in the *pueblo* (town) of Santa María Ixcotel, from which it takes its name. But it is practically inside the limits of Oaxaca City, within the metropolitan urban area of the growing provincial city—just a ten or fifteen-minute bus ride from the historic center.

Etla Prison stands on the edges of the old Zapotec pueblo of Villa de Etla, about a thirty-minute drive west of the city. During my longest leg of dissertation fieldwork in Oaxaca, in 2012-2013, the regulations of these two prisons were such that, as a visitor, I could spend five or six hours inside the prison.

### **Alvaro: Ixcotel Prison, New Year's Eve 2015**

Álvaro was sitting there as he told me stories about walking. He gave me a little wooden engraving of the Virgin of Guadalupe, which he made himself. It is touching to me that he would give me this. He tells me a story about walking and walking in the days of The Organization, and finding a small altar in a cave where there was an image of the Virgin in stone. And a poor family living out in the monte having been driven out by pistoleros.

She is marked by tiny knife marks, hairline incisions: asterisks mottling a tiny wooden rebozo (shawl). She stands on top of a crescent moon, surrounded by rays of carved wood, emanating all around her, as if she were eclipsing a tiny wooden sun, inside the edges of the wooden block fitting in the palm of my hand, which Álvaro carved and sculpted in the prison carpentry shop (taller de carpintería). Below the moon, a cherub with its arms and wings outstretched faces down and to the left (almost like that other angel, the one that faces the past—and us—its wings and arms outstretched, as implacable hurricane winds hurl it backwards, into the future.

The small wooden etching of Guadalupe isn't finished; Álvaro was emphatic about this. He gifted it to me during one of my last visits to Ixcotel Prison (12/2015). We were speaking about the past: talking about walking in Loxicha, as farmers and teachers do in Loxicha, along footpaths, and about walking in the days of the Organization, then always at night. And we talked about the intimacy of those landscapes, paths, places, still tethered to his memory. Earlier that day, along this walk through the backroads of memory, sitting opposite me on a bunk in his cell, Álvaro recalled the story of another image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, hidden in a cave, taken there by a family of orphans, whom he and his compas once encountered in the days of The Organization, on one of those long treks.

He gave it to me, hesitantly, insisting that “it isn’t finished.” He had carved it out of a block of wood, from a scrap—just for himself, he said. He had a bit of time between carpentry projects in the prison shop, so he took a scrapped block of wood and decided to try carving this little image of Guadalupe and see how it turned out. He had it in the cell, on the bunk above my head. But it wasn’t finished, he insisted: he was going to paint and varnish it—but he said, if I liked it, he’d like to give it to me. I, personally, liked the raw look of the unvarnished wood, and tried to assuage his discomfort over gifting a subpar piece of his handiwork. I assured him I liked it very much as it was. But he made me promise to at least varnish it, to protect the wood. However, I must confess that I’ve kept it the way it was when he gave it to me. This way I can easily see the minute marks left by his tools. By the hands of a carpenter, an artist, a Mexican Catholic, an atheist, a revolutionary, a prisoner. In them you can see traces of labor, of life in prison. Of dense webs of meaning and history.

\*

**Part 2 of the dissertation** introduces readers to the indigenous political prisoners of Loxicha, hundreds of whom were incarcerated in the late 1990s and early 2000s, accused of participating in the 1996 guerrilla uprising of the Popular Revolutionary Army (Ejército Popular Revolucionario, EPR). The following chapters of the dissertation focus particularly on last seven Loxicha prisoners who were serving long-term sentences in low-security state prisons near Oaxaca City at the time of my fieldwork, four of whom I came to know well and whom I interviewed on many occasions between 2012 and 2018. In early 2018, I conducted my first interviews with them outside of the prison, in freedom. First, however, I present a series of ethnographic vignettes drawn from my fieldwork in the Zapotec town of San Agustín Loxicha, in order to situate the prisoners’ stories in relation to their place of origin, where they had all spent most of their lives prior to their incarceration.

When I was living in San Agustín Loxicha and returning frequently to Oaxaca City to visit the

prisoners, I would visit the Loxicha prisoners several times per month, usually for several hours at a time, in Ixcotel and Etna state penitentiaries, near Oaxaca City. After leaving “the field” in the fall of 2013, I still returned to Mexico each year to visit my family, and I continued to visit the prisoners once or twice each year, up until the last ones—Álvaro, Abraham, and Zacarías, who are the focus of chapter 5—were released in 2017. During my visits to Ixcotel and Etna in years prior, the Loxicha men and I would hold long conversations and I would interview them—by which I mean, they would tell me stories, and I would listen and write them, record their words in my notebook as thoroughly as I could. And we would also share meals or walk through other parts of the prison, or spend time with visiting relatives or friends. This was possible because in the early days because visitors were permitted to remain in the prison and move throughout it between the hours of 9am to 4pm, Tuesday - Sunday—a policy which later changed.

My prison ethnography was, therefore, intermittent—partly by necessity, on account of the restrictions on visiting the prisons, yet also by design, due to my desire to engage with and write about the prisoners and their stories from the vantage point not only of the prisons outside the city, but also from that of their native communities: the places where they grew up, where they focused their energies as activists before prisoners, and which they were forced to abandon.

In tandem with my intermittent ethnography of prison life, I also spent approximately fourteen months residing in San Agustín Loxicha, alternating between the *pueblo* and the state capital, where I would visit the prisons, as well as consult archives and interview other actors, such as lawyers, activists, former prisoners, Xiches who emigrated to the city, and others. In counterpoint to their physical presence in prison, my fieldwork in Loxicha was partly an investigation about absence—the absence of the prisoners, as well as those who were killed, disappeared, or forced to flee during the post-1996 violence, following the EPR attacks on the coast. A few months before I began visiting the prisoners, I relocated (or, rather, multi-located) from Oaxaca City, where I kept renting a miniscule apartment on the outskirts of the city, to San Agustín



Loxicha, the *cabecera* (lit. “head town;” the main town and political center) of the prisoners’ native district, four hours south of the capital, where the Loxicha men had grown up in peasant villages.

I went to Loxicha in order to seek out the memories of the prisoners, or the silences left in their wake—to trace their footsteps, particularly in relation to the Organization of Indigenous Zapotec Communities (Organización de Pueblos Indígenas Zapotecos, OPIZ), the indigenous political movement that many of the eventual prisoners participated in during the eighties and early nineties.

During my time living in the pueblo of San Agustín Loxicha, I recorded long-form oral history interviews with Xiches (Loxicha Zapotecs) regarding the legacies of the prisoners and OPIZ, as well other elements of local history, memory, and politics. I also spent several months researching local archives, while simultaneously learning about and participating in different aspects of community life in Loxicha, particularly through the local Catholic parish and its *pastoral indígena*. During these investigations, I kept my eyes and ears toward the ways in which Xiches would invoke memories or stories about the prisoners and the OPIZ: invoked or silenced, recounted or revised, celebrated or shunned.

The following chapters draw on fieldwork among and in collaboration with the Loxicha prisoners and their solidarity networks, as well in San Agustín Loxicha.. The following chapters explore particular episodes and elements of thirty years of Xiche Zapotec activism history, primarily through the words and stories of the prisoners and Xiches living in San Agustín Loxicha, themselves. Oral histories in chapters 5 and 6 provide a framework, through the storytelling in acts of testimony, through which to understand the history political organizing, militancy, and political violence and persecution surrounding the incarcerated men from Loxicha and their families and communities.

One of the arguments running through this dissertation, and particularly through the following chapters, is that testimony and memory act in counterpoint to silencing forces of death, poverty, repression,

or incarceration, opening channels through which to grasp the meanings and impacts of collective action and struggles for dignity and wellbeing, but also the meaning and impacts of violence and silence.

Testimony, in other words, allows us to grasp not only the meaning of radical politics in poor and marginalized indigenous communities, but also to grapple with and make sense of the void left in the wake of failed revolutionary movements. Testimony and memory illuminate the contours of silences and absences; they create the scaffolding with which prisoners or political movements can build new political projects, out of and over the wreckage of violent pasts.

In order to perceive the forms of resistance that emerged in San Agustín Loxicha since the 1980s, occidental coordinates of time and space are insufficient. This is something the Zapatistas have understood and been able to communicate. The Zapatistas' resistance lives on, while that of the OPIZ collapsed—yet it might have functioned. The success and vitality of the Zapatistas lay partly in their decision to de-emphasize the military aspect of their resistance.

Chapter 4 examines their history and legacy but from the perspective of life in their home in San Agustín Loxicha fifteen years since they left it. I do so through a brief examination of the social and cultural history of Southern Zapotecs and San Agustín Loxicha, touching on the colonial origins (and historical contradictions) of its political institutions and authorities, and the political geography of contemporary Oaxaca and its indigenous communities. It is worth noting that a different thesis about the same topic, political prisoners in Oaxaca, might have begun by examining the history of Mexico's penal system or the broader history of state terror and political persecution of leftist armed movements. Yet, while I do touch on these subjects throughout the dissertation, I instead chose to ground this study of long-term political prisoners by looking at their native communities. Rather than beginning with the Mexican penal system, this story begins in the *pueblo*, the town of San Agustín Loxicha. In the following sections, my analysis focuses on rituals around death and municipal politics, aspects of life in Loxicha where the absence and silent

legacies of the prisoners and the OPIZ movement in the 1990s is pronounced, without explicitly addressing or invoking these.

Chapter 4 situates the Loxicha Prisoners movement that emerged in the late 1990s by tracing parts of its genealogy and context—specifically, in relation to what I call the 1984 ‘municipal insurgency,’ which gave rise to Loxicha’s revolutionary indigenous movement (OPIZ). Many, though not all, of the future Loxicha prisoners participated in this movement in the eighties and nineties, as it grew in influence and participation in the rural communities of the sierra and coast around Loxicha, up until the 1996 EPR debacle and subsequent repression. And it situates these in relation to the broader political geography of Oaxaca and the history of the hinge institution of cabildos and community authorities. This chapter situates the origins of Loxicha’s indigenous movement in the 1980s and the prisoners movement in the 1990s and 2000s by casting an ethno-historical gaze on institutions of local government and the formations of power and authority in southern Oaxaca’s indigenous communities. The specific focus of the chapter is, therefore, the historical formations of “el palacio” (the government office building, or “palace”)—a hallmark of urban and rural polities throughout Mexico and much of Latin America which houses, as well as symbolizes political power at the community level. Federal, state, and municipal governments in Mexico are each housed in their own palacios. This chapter touches on the history of this institution, in Mexico and Oaxaca, as well as historical ethnography of the actual material structure of Loxicha’s palacio. Looking through the prison of the palace is necessary in order to understand the past half century of political mobilization and violence in San Agustín Loxicha, along with the shifting relationship between social movement, institutional/material power, and the social-political landscapes in which they are rooted.

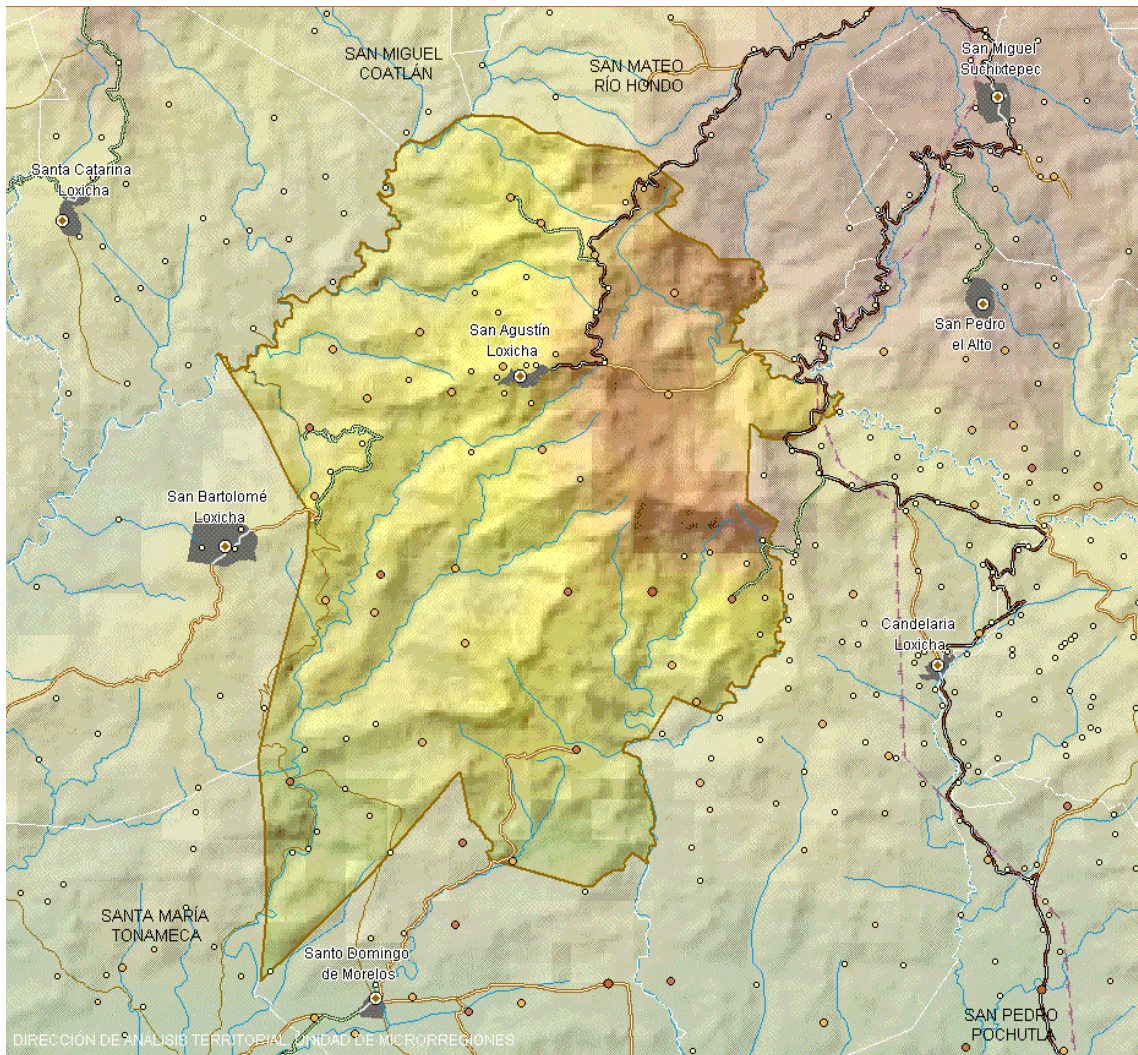


Figure 5. Municipal map of San Agustín Loxicha (INEGI)

## Silences

There is a tension running through this dissertation, particularly in its second portion, which deals with the Loxicha prisoners and the history of San Agustín Loxicha. This tension is something that the reader may notice, or feel, and may desire and expect a resolution to: but here I must add a warning. The tension I speak of is a question. And the question goes like this: Were they? Or weren't they? These chapters are about the voices and histories of a group of indigenous political prisoners who were arrested by the hundreds in the 1990s and charged with being members of an armed revolutionary organization, the EPR,

and of participating in acts of violence against soldiers and police. Were they? Or weren't they? More than two hundred and fifty Zapotecs from the Loxicha region were charged with state and federal crimes related to the EPR attack on Huatulco in 1996. A former lawyer at the public prosecutor's office in 1996 remembers how soldiers would bring these men into their offices for interrogation and processing—"tied up like little bundles (*como costalitos*)," and showing visible signs of torture. The majority of them were peasant farmers, and many of them spoke little or no Spanish. The vast majority of these cases—the products of arrests "*al vapor*"—were dropped for lack of evidence or undue process, in part, thanks to the work of an activist lawyer, Israel Ochoa Lara (who mostly worked pro bono) in collaboration with a human rights organization, LIMEDDH, the only Oaxacan NGO to undertake a sustained support of the hundreds of Zapotec prisoners. So they weren't, then?

Not one of the hundreds of Zapotecs who were charged with belonging to the EPR ever accepted or claimed to be part of this organization. On the other hand, and concurrently, indigenous Mayan prisoners in Chiapas, such as Alberto Patishtán, openly recognized belonging to the Zapatista movement; and Gloria Arenas and Jacobo Silva openly recognized their former militance in the EPR and, then, its off-shoot, the ERPI. Yet, among the long-term Loxicha prisoners, none ever claimed this identity, not even after they exhausted every legal recourse to amend their sentences. Among the prisoners and in San Agustín Loxicha, there was essentially a taboo around the sound of the acronym—"eh-peh-erre." Does that mean that most of them were not, while a few were? Could it perhaps mean that many had been, yet that the trauma and the lessons of repression were so severe that a radical political identity simply became untenable, too dangerous, or too fraught?

A reader may be tempted to read my own silences and uncertainties, and to assume that these conceal a hidden "yes," of some kind. I would advise the reader against such thinking. To the reader who wants to understand, I would suggest, instead, to just listen closely to the words of the prisoners, themselves,

and of their *paisanas* and *paisanos* from Loxicha. There is no simple answer—although there are answers. Yet they are not simple to grasp, their contours are too wide. Herein lies the strength of ethnography, which requires a lot of waiting and a lot of listening, yet renders complex answers to complex questions. And of history, which allows us to see how such complexity develops and changes. So, then, they were, right?

Mexico's National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) published a damning report about human rights abuses in Loxicha. It published this report in 2003, two years after the Oaxacan legislature ratified an amnesty law, drafted by the governor's office, for the Loxicha prisoners facing state charges, which was the majority.

It draws attention to the poverty in the region, basically equating this with a formula for radicalism, and it highlights the special precarity of women in the region. Yet, just as it damns the government, so too it condemns radicals and essentially throws the prisoners under the bus, making no appeal for further reductions of the sentences beyond the Amnesty Law. It exhorts the state and federal government to investigate itself and fight impunity in its own ranks. Yet it concludes by siding with the government on one crucial aspect: condemning armed violence — and proclaiming that the guerrillas were there, and therefore implying that at least some of the prisoners were part of it. The CNDH critiqued, while essentially upholding, the official narrative.<sup>136</sup>

So were they or weren't they? I discussed this issue with Erika Sebastián, the daughter of one of the long-term Loxicha prisoners, Álvaro, and with her partner and *compa*. At the center of their proposal was

---

<sup>136</sup> *Finalmente esta Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos reitera que bajo ninguna circunstancia puede considerarse a la vía armada como medio para la solución de conflictos y reivindicación de demandas sociales y políticas, independientemente de la legitimidad que pudieren tener éstas, pero tampoco puede ser aceptable la falta de atención gubernamental a sectores importantes de la población con altos índices de marginación y pobreza extrema. En ese tenor, en los tres niveles de gobierno, deberá privilegiarse el diálogo y la concertación política para encauzar, por la vía legal y en estricto apego al estado de derecho, las justas demandas que las comunidades y las diversas organizaciones civiles y políticas han presentado para la atención de las necesidades de los habitantes de la Región Loxicha del estado de Oaxaca.* Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos (CNDH), "Informe Especial : Caso de La Región Loxicha," 2003.

testimony and life story.

## **The Word Loxicha**

*Los Loxichas* in plural noun (with a capital L) form refers to the cluster of communities in Oaxaca's Sierra Sur sharing the "surname" Loxicha, particularly those whose inhabitants speak Coatlán-Loxicha Zapotec (see Beam de Azcona 2004). *Los loxichas*, in adjectival form (with lower-case L) refers to people from Loxicha. In Oaxaca City—where the Loxicha prisoners' case was in the news for years, and where Loxicha women occupied the Zócalo for four years to protest against the incarceration of their relatives, giving them a public presence—"los loxichas" often, perhaps most often, refers specifically to the prisoners.

However, "Loxicha" became a household word in Oaxaca during the late nineties due to the sheer number of Zapotecs from San Agustín Loxicha who ended up in state prisons near the state capital. Eventually, the quotidian use of the word in Oaxaca City expanded to include women from Loxicha whose protest camp became a permanent fixture in the Zócalo, the central square of Oaxaca City, which they occupied for four years. "Loxicha" has since been associated, at different times, with prisoners, protestors, armed conflict, state racism, and political instability. The "Loxichas" and their allies (a few lawyers, activists, and NGOs) faced significant challenges in reversing the prosecutions and sentences against them, as well as in confronting the state of violence surrounding them.

The older sense of Loxicha is that of a Zapotec place and toponym with deep historical meanings and attachments. Linguist Rosemary Beam de Azcona has studied the neighboring Coatlán-Loxicha Zapotec language spoken in San Baltasar Loxicha and Santa Catarina Loxicha.<sup>137</sup> In the late 1990s,

---

<sup>137</sup> *Loxicha is a bimorphemic word of entirely Zapotec origin. Lo- is found on place names in the SZ and NZ areas. According to*

'Loxicha' became notably more polysemic and complicated, as the word accreted new meanings and associations beyond its ethnic, linguistic, and geographical connotations. Loxicha blew up, semiotically, becoming a hot topic and buzzword, as the number of people who had ever heard or read the word 'Loxicha' suddenly exploded, and it acquired a certain notoriety, as well as becoming a fixture (minor, but stubborn) in the political spheres in Oaxaca.

The first time that I can recall hearing the word *Loxicha* was in the occupied Zócalo, the main plaza in Oaxaca's historic downtown, in the midst of the teachers union's yearly strike and multitudinous protests in May 2008. At least, I think that was the first time I heard about Loxicha, from the *barricaderxs* whom I spent several weeks hanging out with in the occupied Zócalo, as part of my earliest ethnographic forays around social movements, radicalism, political violence and historical memory in Oaxaca.

The Loxicha story also stood out to me at the time, for the hushed tones it elicited and the darkness, pain, and silence that seemed to surround even casual allusions to it. The effervescence of the APPO movement raised many historical experiences and memories that had previously remained half-forgotten or submerged below the surface of public discourse on the Left. By 2008, the youths and *barricaderxs* of the post-APPO movement had re-baptized the city from Oaxaca de Juárez to Oaxaca de Magón, for the Oaxacan-born anarchist, and they were plastering images of Lucio Cabañas, the guerrilla teacher from

---

*Brandomin (1992) it comes from the Zapotec loho 'lugar' ('place'). This is probably the word for 'face' which is ndo in CLZ but lo in related languages such as SAMZ. This word is also used like a preposition meaning 'to, towards, facing, at' and is commonly used to express location. Brandomin gives the xicha morpheme the meaning of 'piña' ('pineapple'). However in CLZ the tone does not quite match... "An equally good candidate as 'pineapple' is 'tejón; coatimundi' mxi7zh. Both of these last two words have glottal tone in CLZ while the toponym has low tone. This does not rule them out though because there are some related words which differ by these two tones. Another possibility is that the town is named after a flower. Ortega (1777) in his relación of Santiago Lapaguía, mentions a flowering tree with fragrant white flowers which he calls plurifundio in Spanish. He writes, "in the Zapotec language they name them luxicha." This tree is also found in SBL where in Spanish it is called florifunda or the more standard florifundio and in Zapotec me yi which translates as 'señor flor; Mr. flower.' This flower is very fragrant and is also an entheogen (Ott 2004). Thus, if this is the correct etymology, the town's name could either refer to the existence of this plant in SBL (which would hardly be a feature unique to this town, though perhaps there could have been a tree on a particularly important spot there) or, hypothetically, the name could refer to the use of this plant by shamans in SBL. I have not heard reports of me yi being used in this way in SBL but the use of a higher animate classifier in the name suggests knowledge of its entheogenic properties. In Beam de Azcona, "A Coatlán-Loxicha Zapotec Grammar," 8.*



Guerrero State, on public walls. They were also looking out to other struggles, historic and ongoing, such as the conflict over municipal autonomy and paramilitary violence in San Juan Copala. Or remembering the half-forgotten political prisoners of San Agustín Loxicha.

It was among them that I first recall hearing about Loxicha and the story of its prisoners, which many young *appistas* described as an indigenous struggle that was a precursor of the APPO. Yet I can't be sure. It is entirely possible that I might have heard the word "Loxicha" at some point in the late 1990s, growing up in Mexico. If I had come across the word in those years, it likely would have been in a newspaper or a news report in the radio (although my exposure to these was limited as I was twelve years old when the EPR made its first public appearance); and it would almost certainly have been in connection with the following words, depending on the news source: *presos* (prisoners) and *presuntos integrantes del EPR* (presumed members of the Popular Revolutionary Army, EPR, or *eperristas* (from the phonetic pronunciation of EPR: eh-peh-erre, eh-peh-rista). At the height of the conflict, between 1996 and 2001, various national periodicals ran stories about the prisoners or reports about the human rights abuses taking place around San Agustín Loxicha in the hunt for alleged "Eperristas." A few international periodicals, including the *New York Times*, published a couple of pieces, at the height of the media buzz surrounding the EPR.

In Mexico, it was primarily left-leaning newspapers and journals, such as *La Jornada* or *Proceso*, that covered, not just the EPR attacks, but also the government's reaction against it and the effects of counterinsurgency on indigenous and peasant communities in Oaxaca or Guerrero states—on account of the surge in popular and state interest in indigenous rights and communities, due to the Zapatist uprising in 1994. I do remember the Zapatistas. But that's the difference: You didn't have to read the newspaper to be aware of the Zapatistas after January 1, 1994—even a nine-year old attending private school in Mexico City was aware of it.

I very well might have heard the word *Loxicha* later, around 1996 or 1997, as a middle school student in Mexico City, alongside words such as *presuntos integrantes del EPR... acusados de participar en los ataques contra marinos y policías en La Crucecita Huatulco el 28 de agosto de 1996*. I may have come across that Zapotec word, *Loxicha*, enclosed in a phrase in Mexican Spanish, or perhaps in Mexican English (which we spoke half the time in my house)—on the radio or in a newspaper or, less likely, overheard in a conversation among adults (less likely because of the socio-economic and political orientation of my home and school life). But, if I hold that it's conceivable that I might have heard the word growing up, it would have been once or maybe twice; not enough to commit to memory. It was, after all, a minor story. And, again, I don't remember.

-\*-

## Chapter 4. The Silhouettes of Silence

### On the Urvan (An Arrival Story)

In the '*urvan*' (mini-van) before dawn, hearing the tinny, dull-bass-thumping blend of tunes coming through the van's stereo speakers: half an hour of narco-corridos or cumbia playing off the driver's USB drive, interspersed with lapses of local radio stations: rancheras y mexicanas—talk-show chatter about health, or Jesucristo—local sones chilenas—news about recent landslides in the Mixteca and elections in Argentina—the soundscape shifting as we weave in and out of valleys and reception, traveling at what feels like extraordinary speed through the night; it's incredible that the tall white van, with its twelve occupants swaying in tandem inside, maintains its grip and its course on the sinuous and accidentado two-lane highway, that snakes (like a black river, illuminated here and there by headlights that look like solitary deep-water lightning fish) along ravines, into valleys, and through the centers of sleeping towns. The road draws lines across the landscape that render clusters of settlements and towns into constellations: Between Miahuatlán, the southernmost large town (or small city) of the Central Valleys of Oaxaca, and Pochutla on the coast, where the southbound traveler encounters a T-juncture and the decision to head East or West along the Pacific coast.

Careening through the night and breaking suddenly to avoid a pothole, accelerating before another jolt of sudden deceleration—thump—to bounce, indelicately but efficiently, over another speed-bump marking population centers—accelerating, jolt, then accelerating fast to pass a small *camión de redil* (pickup

truck with wooden boards or metal scaffolding in the back) loaded with produce—at last, a small stretch free of traffic and speed bumps, careening again—third gear, fourth gear. And now it's José Alfredo Jiménez emitting from the speakers, as distant clouds begin catching fire over the east, behind the black silhouette of the rolling sierra and the faint plumes of mist rising from the high forest.

Twelve people fly through the mountain pass in the night. In the back, an elderly woman closes her eyes clutching the woven plastic bag and her bunched up skirts on her lap; an infant occasionally wakes up but sleeps most of the way in its mother's arm. In the front seat, the driver is having a lively chat with a young woman who studies in Oaxaca.

## **Roads to Loxicha**

The preceding section gives us a sense of the nearness and the separation between the prison and the town, as well as a glimpse of everyday life of Xiches, including those who were part of the prisoners' drama (as prisoners or family members, and in general for Xiches, who take this road frequently. The road, as I came to learn, is itself a material outcome of the OPIZ movement and the prisoners story: In the early days of the Organization, one of the main demands they held was infrastructure. In the past, Loxicha was a deep backwater, taking several days voyage with much walking to move from the town to the city. Yet it was only after the armed conflict that the government invested in paved roads to the region effectively in order to provide better access to military and police forces.

Roads, their development, their absence, and their conditions are all constant subjects of concern in Loxicha. They are constant refrains in the stories Xiches tell about their community—about the motivations and reasons of the armed movement, about the state of current politics and politicians. Roads index the state of things, particularly in regard to the ties between Loxicha and the world beyond it (nearby cities, Mexico,

the United States).

The constant discussion about the viability of roads—a question that is in constant shift due to the cycle of dry and rainy seasons, the rapid deterioration of materials, the perennial difficulty of the terrain, erosion, climate change and harsher weather conditions in recent years. Half of the year, several communities become isolated except on foot. Half of the year, one can go from Loxicha to Santa Cata via San Mateo and San Bartolo, but during the rainy season that road becomes impossible for vehicles, and to get to Santa Cata you have to go back through El Manzanal, Miahuatlán, and back up through the Coatlanes. Same for the roads connecting the higher towns like San Agustín with the lower towns nearer the coast. Roads are thus a source of constant and intense interest and energy. Few people own cars. They rely on a variety of forms of public and collective transport that correspond to different areas and distances.

We arrived to the center of San Agustín Loxicha in the early afternoon as a thick gray mist became a fine gray rain, shrouding the town's main street and wetting the concrete walls of its large dilapidated church by which we parked. The driver of the *taxi colectivo* and six passengers—two from the front passenger seat and four from the back—descended from the small red and white Japanese automobile<sup>138</sup> into the rain, softly groaning and sighing in relief after two hours onboard the cramped *colectivo*, as it wound southward from the market town of Miahuatlán, ascending hundreds of meters into the mountains of Oaxaca's *Sierra Sur* on a choppy two-lane highway towards the coast of Oaxaca for about an hour, before veering westward into the *sierra de Loxicha* on a badly deteriorated road for a further hour. Several of the passengers (including me) had traveled further, from Oaxaca City, another two hours north of Miahuatlán by *urvan*

---

<sup>138</sup> The Tsuru, an inexpensive Japanese car, became pervasive throughout Mexico in the 2000s, replacing the Volkswagen Beetle as the machine of choice for many working class Mexicans, as well as taxis and small businesses.

(mini-van) through Oaxaca's Central Valleys—each two-hour leg of the trip costing \$50 pesos.<sup>139</sup>

If you've ever spent time in a Mexican town—certainly, if you've ever visited the indigenous or *campesino* communities of Oaxaca's Central Valleys or the Isthmus of Tehuantepec—the first thing you're likely to notice when you step out of the *colectivo* onto the muddy street at the center of Loxicha is the absence of any central plaza—a hallmark of the vast majority of towns and cities in Oaxaca and throughout central and southern Mexico and Guatemala. You also notice the verticality of the landscape, even here in the middle of the urban hub of the old Southern Zapotec town; and you realize that perhaps there is simply no place to build a plaza on a slope. Yet, despite the absence of a large open square flanked by the town's main church, its government buildings, and other seats of power, those same structures and the areas around them—the hollow church and the chapel across the street (then serving as the functional church while the larger one was under repair); the nearby *palacio municipal*, the covered market, an auditorium, a primary school, a few small shops and eateries—still<sup>140</sup> constitute the palpable, symbolic, political, and institutional center of the head town (*cabecera*) and of its more than seventy smaller subject settlements (*agencias*, *agencias de policía rural*, *rancherías*) in the surrounding valleys that constitute the municipality.

The church, next to which two or three *colectivos* parked, stood in varying states of disrepair: the tall cupula on one of the two towering belfries was collapsed, showing patches of sky through its exposed ribs; whereas the wall facing the street revealed a fairly recent cement job, though it remained unpainted—the signs of uneven renovation in starts and halts, over years, due to anemic budgets and mismanagement.

After grabbing my backpack from the trunk of the *colectivo*, I walked around the side of the church to the main entrance, in order to inquire about the priest, Padre Fidel Zurita. However, the tall doors of the

---

<sup>139</sup> Colectivos run several times each day, except for certain holidays and certain slow Sundays. Direct trips to Oaxaca, a recent thing, leave two or three times most days on urban mini-vans.

<sup>140</sup> And a little fountain crowned by the statue of a coiled snake in the patio in front of the church.

church were shuttered and silent. Peering through a paneless round window back on the street, it appeared that the church had been silent for some time.

I didn't yet know it, but the padre had his office and living quarters behind the church, and church activities were being held across the street, in the smaller *capilla*, while the main church remained under construction. Renovations, I would soon find out, had been underway for several years, through promises from several cohorts of municipal and parish authorities, and the patient exasperation of parishioners and townsfolk—reminiscent of the long-delayed project and clamor to renovate the municipal palace, in the early 1980s.

Upon finding the tall doors of the church shuttered and silent, I crossed the unevenly paved street and took shelter under the arcade of the *palacio municipal*. It was then I realized there was no square plaza between the two structures, and I wondered why and how this town somehow escaped the pervasive grid structure, centered around a main plaza flanked by a church and a government building—the urban planning of Spanish colonialism that was imposed upon Oaxaca's indigenous communities in the 1500s, the legacy of which is evident in the urban space of most indigenous and peasant communities still today in central and southern Mexico and Guatemala. Had the founders of this Zapotec town somehow escaped Spanish control by settling in an especially remote and inaccessible mountain region, as others had attempted in the early colonial period? Or did the dramatic verticality of the landscape simply make it impossible to implement Spanish colonial urban planning here? Indeed, it is difficult to imagine how a plaza would fit on the sloping geography of the town center. Peering through the open arches of the *municipio*.<sup>141</sup>

---

<sup>141</sup> The term “*el municipio*” can refer to, either, the local municipal government (made up of a town council, a municipal president (mayor) and *regidores* (stewards))—in other words, an institution—or it can also refer to the physical territory (together with its populations and resources) within its political boundaries: It is something you can point to on a map. Similarly, the term “*el palacio*” is often used interchangeably with *municipio* to refer to the actual material structure (building) that houses the government, or, synecdochally, to the institution, or to a particular administration.



Figure 6. Map of southern Loxicha region (Archivo Municipal San Agustín Loxicha, undated, late 1700s)

### My Plans on Arriving to Loxicha: Alignments and Authority

The first thing I had planned to do in Loxicha was to seek out the local priest, Padre Fidel Zurita, as well as the municipal president (mayor), in order to introduce myself, describe my research project to them, and perhaps ask for any special permissions, guidance, or assistance that I might need from them in order to carry out my work—that is, assuming they were supportive or, at least, acquiescent of my work in the community. Given what I had heard about the priest and the municipal president, I expected and hoped for support from the former, and acquiescence from the latter.

I had spent the past few months learning everything I could about Loxicha and its famous prisoners



from a distance, while seeking out contacts and points of connection among the prisoners and their hometown. In both cases, my plan was to approach both the prisoners and the community, as much as possible, through mutual contacts or trusted connections among academics, activists, and organizations. The experience of Juan Sosa's abortive and confusing solidarity event outside of Ixcotel Prison during the MPJD's caravan visit to Oaxaca in October had driven home the importance of being tactful in making alliances or appearing to be "with someone" (politically) while navigating Oaxaca's "*quesillo político*." Therefore, I waited for a time before attempting to visit the prisoners on my own. I first approached them through prisoner solidarity events organized for Álvaro Sebastián organized by his support network and relatives, which resulted in a collective prison visit.

This is about alignments in initiating an engaged project. In a sense, my alignment with Unitierra emerged out of my desire to follow a Charles Hale-esque model of activist research, in which the entire research project is a collaborative process designed and carried out in dialogue "with an organized group of people in struggle."<sup>142</sup> However, this model proved too constrained for an environment as polarized, (understandably) paranoid, and fractured as San Agustín Loxicha. There, in order to carry out politically engaged research, I had to be more outwardly apolitical, in a strange reversal.

However, approaching the community in this way was also complicated. A year of working with Universidad de la Tierra and the Espacio Ciudadano in Oaxaca City, and of participating in various leftist circles and activities around Oaxaca had led me several times to communities in Oaxaca's Sierra Norte region, where many rural communities were well connected to Oaxaca's urban social movement scene and leftist political organizations and NGOs (such as Unitierra). Yet, even without the benefit of these experiences in the communities of the Sierra Norte, finding helpful contacts, academic or political, willing to

---

<sup>142</sup> See Hale, "Activist Research v. Cultural Critique."

introduce a politically engaged researcher to people in Guelatao or Tlahuitoltepec would have presented relatively few complications. On the other hand, contacts and connections in the communities of the Sierra Sur, proved much harder to come by in Oaxaca's NGO-sphere. Historically, the indigenous communities of Oaxaca have attracted large numbers of researchers and academics, including historians and anthropologists,<sup>143</sup> although they have largely focused on regions such as the Sierra Norte or the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. In comparison, Oaxaca's Sierra Sur has received scant attention from researchers.<sup>144</sup>

Eventually, I learned from a *compa* at Unitierra, with whom I was then collaborating on an alternative education project called *La Academia de la Comunalidad* (Academy of Communalidad),<sup>145</sup> that an old friend of his, Parastoo Mesri—an Iranian doctor of law who taught in Oaxaca—had carried out her own dissertation research in Loxicha. I excitedly set up a meeting with Parastoo, even though it turned out that she had carried out her research in Candelaria Loxicha—a<sup>146</sup> different municipality several kilometers to the south, near the coast. The inhabitants of Candelaria Loxicha and those of San Agustín Loxicha share the same language, Coatlán-Loxicha Zapotec,<sup>147</sup> and they identify as a same people. Oral accounts trace the origins of Candelaria back to a group of colonists from San Agustín Loxicha. Nonetheless, thanks to her experiences as a researcher in Candelaria Loxicha, Parastoo provided me with invaluable insights and

---

<sup>143</sup> Anthropologists have produced a significant body of work focused on Oaxaca's indigenous communities, including influential community studies.

<sup>144</sup> To my current knowledge, Beam de Azcona's dissertation, *A Coatlán Loxicha Zapotec Grammar* is the only full-length scholarly monograph that focuses directly on the Loxicha region.

<sup>145</sup> The Academy of Communalidad, an alternative education project focused on exploring the concept of "*comunalidad*" that Zapotec and Mixe intellectuals proposed in the 1980s as an alternative conceptual framework through which to grasp "the hold life has" (to borrow Malinowski's phrase) on rural and indigenous Oaxacans, as an alternative to the dominant Marxist analysis in Mexican anthropology at the time. See Jaime Martínez Luna, *Comunalidad y desarrollo*, Cultura indígena; (México, D.F. : CONACULTA : Centro de Apoyo al Movimiento Popular Oaxaqueño, 2003); Jaime Martínez Luna, *Eso que llaman comunalidad* (México, D.F. : Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes : Fundación Alfredo Harp Helú Oaxaca, 2010).

<sup>146</sup> The word "Loxicha," on its own, refers to San Agustín Loxicha. SAL is thus *the* Loxicha, whereas, other communities with the "surname" Loxicha are always referred to in conjunction with, or by its first name alone: e.g., Candelaria Loxicha, Santa Catarina Loxicha (or Santa Cata'), San Baltazar Loxicha (or San Balta').

<sup>147</sup> *Di7zh ke7* (or *dis té*), writes Beam de Azcona, "could be translated as 'palabra o lengua de los señores; word or language of the lords.'" In her *Grammar*, she makes a compelling case for her choice of the revised term "Loxicha-Coatlán Zapotec" (or *zapoteco de Coatlán y Loxicha*), as opposed to other (self-admittedly "cumbersome" "mouthfuls") terms for the language spoken in most of the Loxichas and the neighboring Coatlanes in the Sierra Sur. Beam de Azcona, "A Coatlán-Loxicha Zapotec Grammar," 5.

guidance as I prepared to move to Loxicha.

What should I do when I get to Loxicha? I asked her. My notes from our first meeting, early one morning in her office in Oaxaca, from which we walked to a café, contain some of the advice she offered, based on her experiences of fieldwork in Candelaria:

*Wake up early. Go to mass regularly, at least once a week. Try doing an interview every day. Before anything—introduce yourself to the municipal authorities when you arrive, and offer your services to the community, in any form possible: offer classes, help out in the library, give tequio [collective or community labor; usually manual, like construction or renovation of public works, houses, fields, etc.]. Don't lose heart if you don't succeed in making friends immediately.*

### **Waiting for the Suplente**

I am sitting on a wooden bench on the second floor of the municipal palace, waiting, as always, for the deputy municipal president (“el Suplente”). The day is sunny, with mountain-sized clouds that float beyond the mountains of woods and rocks to the east. The air is cold. It’s Saturday around lunch time and there is little movement in the center of town. On the balcony of the palacio there is only me on the bench and two municipal policemen dressed in black, cradling long gray shotguns in their hands, reclining against the banister beneath the sunlit arches, or strolling slowly from one end of the second floor to the other—black figures that move with the same rhythm, a lethargic to-and-fro, of the zopilotes (vultures) in the distance, each occupying the same plane in my line of vision, covering bits of sky over the ravines beyond.

Everything here is hillside; hence, police and zopilotes occupy the same plane before me, covering pieces of sky, motionless—they here, the others further off, over the communities “down below,” as they say around here, in the depths of precipitous gorges and valleys descending, violently green, towards the sea on the horizon: Chilapa, La Sirena Miramar, Quelové, Magdalena, San Francisco—all of them Loxichas.

Stillness in the breeze that sways the trees ascending the hillsides, sprouting from the corners of the town, peeking out amongst concrete structures covered in peeling paint and black stains of humidity that not

even six months of dry-season can efface. Stillness in the breeze that barely moves a faded tricolor flag, hoisted from a stick of carrizo (bamboo) in front of a small house made of old wood and corrugated laminate roof, across the street from the palacio. Stillness in the vast hollow nave of the church and its shuttered doors; in the belfry under construction and its wooden beams, exposed like spiderwebs; in its simple facade, eaten away by humidity, just few meters from the palacio.

Here there is no open central plaza or square with a gazebo as there are in the majority of towns across Mexico: here, everything is hillside, and there is no room for broad flat spaces. Across the street, the facade of the hollow church faces west, forming a right-angle with the south-facing arcade of the palacio—the north flank of the church barely separated by a few meters of dusty street from the arcade and the auditorium attached to the east end of the palace. In the patio of the church, across the street from the arcade, a small fountain frames the stone statue of a coiled serpent, at the center of that right angle. Standing from here, beyond the palacio one sees the street, a few buildings and houses of the Centro—beyond these, the space and air expand and drop: towards nothingness, towards valleys and simple houses built on hillsides, and a continuous drop in the earth, falling nearly two thousand meters down, to the Pacific Ocean in the hazy distance. Such is the view from the palacio.

The spatial breadth of this place is not on the ground, but in the air: in the gaping wide fissures of the landscape and the open sky extending uninterrupted to the sea, nearly a hundred kilometers to the south. The horizontality of the earth is not that of a plane, but like that of that serpent, uncoiling: the main street winding like a snake, east to west, from the nearby elementary school building to the cemetery at El Calvario, twisting and recoiling once more—falling into dirt roads and footpaths across villages and farms: down below, into humid tropical vegetation and heat. It snakes and winds in the other direction as well: upwards, between the communities and rancherías of the upper parts, from the peak of Tres Cruces, between San Agustín and El Aguacate, to La Paz Obispo and El Manzanal, in the coniferous forests of the

highest parts, and the Oaxaca-Pochutla highway.

### **The Loxicha Palace**

Amongst Zapotecs from San Agustín Loxicha—known as *Xiches*—the fight over the reconstruction of the municipal palace in the early- to mid-1980s is widely remembered as a concrete moment of origin of the OPIZ. *Xiches* who lived through these events, even amongst those too young to have been alive or directly participated, tend to view the palace debacle as the catalyst that inaugurated roughly ten years of political organization and mobilization in Loxicha’s communities; as well as the catalyst for decades of intense political violence and repression, ongoing at the time of my fieldwork (2012-13).

1996. The ousted members of San Agustín Loxicha’s 1996 cabildo were among the first (and among the last to get out), as well as the most prominent of the Loxicha Prisoners. Yet it would be a mistake to assume, therefore, that these cabildo officials must also have been prominent within the OPIZ, or even members of that organization, before being leaders of the prisoners movement. I have said that the Loxicha Prisoners movement emerged out of the wreckage of the OPIZ, yet the two movements should not be conflated.

### **The Destruction of the Palace**

In 1984, Alberto Antonio became the mayor—*presidente municipal*—of San Agustín Loxicha, a large municipality by Oaxacan standards, made up of the urban center of San Agustín and a sparse constellation of rural *agencias*, villages, coffee plantations, corn fields, and dirt roads amongst ragged peaks and green valleys that alternately glimpse, face, and dramatically fall to the Pacific Ocean (or, amongst

verdant valleys ascending from the Pacific Ocean toward ragged peaks and the urban center of San Agustín, el Pueblo Viejo). Alberto Antonio's tenure as mayor was marked from the start by popular upheaval and violence, amidst an escalating conflict between his supporters and their radical platform and the local caciques, the political leaders and coffee merchants. Alberto Antonio was unable to finish his term as mayor: During the third and final year of his administration, eight out of ten members of the cabildo he presided over were ambushed and massacred aboard the pickup truck that brought them back to Loxicha from the state capital, where they went to denounce Alberto Antonio (who was not among them) before state officials of embezzlement in the construction of San Agustín's new municipal building.

The construction of a new *palacio municipal*—and the resultant destruction of the old *palacio* and market—was the nervous center of Alberto Antonio's presidency and a political project of increasingly radical overtones that these events precipitated and materialized. The palace drama became the unlikely catalyst for a wave of grassroots mobilizations and politicized violence that gripped Loxicha during the 1980s and 90s, whose aftershocks rippled far beyond Loxicha's secluded valleys, thrusting its inhabitants (marginalized *campesinos*, mostly) and its formerly unknown name to the forefront of wider conflicts of national and international dimensions: Namely, the economic and social devastation of agrarian Mexico caused by neoliberal reforms beginning in the 1980s and the (re-)emergence of a shadow war between the Mexican State and revolutionary organizations, which in spite of its seeming anachronicity in the mid-1990s, continue to unfold into the 21st century.

### **Municipal Government and Officials**

Why focus on local government in a study about prisoners and social movements? As mentioned earlier, the OPIZ originated specifically in response to the need to defend the works of a radical municipal administration. Thus, from its inception, the OPIZ movement was closely linked to the *palacio*—the

institution, yet also its material foundations. The Organization-palace link was temporarily severed following the premature ending to Alberto Antonio's administration in 1986 and Antonio's expulsion from Loxicha, along with his closest collaborators and their families. The OPIZ then entered a new phase characterized by a bifurcated strategy defined by a "clandestine tract" and a "democratic tract." Over the following decade, the OPIZ gradually resumed and strengthened its collaboration with Loxicha's municipal authorities—although the organization and the municipio maintained a separation from each another. Regardless, in 1996, as the Mexican government unleashed what can only be described as a military and police takeover of San Agustín Loxicha—ostensibly in persecution of the EPR guerrillas who attacked Huatulco one month earlier—the first thing the military did was to arrest every member of the municipal cabildo. Three Xiches had already been arrested earlier in September, in relation with the Huatulco attacks; however, it was the arrest of the 1996 cabildo, en masse, that signaled the beginning of a much more widespread repression. As elected officials and indigenous authorities, the imprisonment of municipal president Agustín Luna Valencia and his cabildo was significant and drew much attention, at a time of intense debates in Mexico and Oaxaca over indigenous rights and autonomy, rebellion, and the constitutional relationship between Mexico's indigenous communities and the state, spurred in large part by the 1994 EZLN uprising in Chiapas.

The Mexican government's persecution and prosecutions of alleged Eperristas in Loxicha began with the arrest of the Agustín Luna Valencia's administration, under sensational charges for local officials elected through *usos y costumbres*: homicide, terrorism, conspiracy, possession of illegal weapons, destruction of property, among others. The 1996 cabildo members became the first of the Loxicha Prisoners, with some of the longest sentences. Why were Loxicha's municipal officials in 1996 targeted as the most prominent early targets of counterinsurgency? And why does the municipal government figure so prominently in these political watersheds for Loxicha, first, in the emergence of the indigenous movement

and, later, at the onset of state repression and the prisoners movement?

## **Cabildos**

Why have San Agustín Loxicha's elected cabildos (town councils)—and their physical and symbolic locus, the municipal palace—played such a central role in the region's social dramas and political vicissitudes in recent decades? Government palaces are ubiquitous throughout the Mexican geography, occupying prominent spaces on the central plazas of cities and towns throughout Spanish America.

The cabildo form of government was imposed early on by the Spanish colonial authorities in the 16th century, in an attempt to integrate indigenous populations into Spanish imperial administration; and they became critical and enduring pieces of colonial administration and governance. At the same time, as I explain later in the chapter, this imposed institution was rapidly adopted and even embraced by many native communities who found in it a mechanism and a stage for the preservation of some degree of political autonomy, as well as for the reproduction and performance of their hybridizing customs, values, and authorities.

Five centuries later, municipal governments—the descendants of those colonial cabildos—remain critical pieces of the modern Mexican political system, serving as the most “local” links between communities' inhabitants and larger state institutions. In the mid- to late twentieth century, municipal ayuntamientos functioned as hinge institutions and figures, mediating various aspects of the relationship between their municipality's constituents, the broader Mexican state, and other local or regional political actors and forces. The specific attributes of municipalities and cabildos can vary greatly across regions, as can their activities, scope, scale, and connection to their constituents. It is partly for this reason that Mexico's municipal governments can, at certain times and under certain conditions, become such versatile and



dynamic political forces. Nor are struggles over municipal resources and power uncommon: In Oaxaca “*conflictos municipales*” are commonplace enough to basically constitute their own genre of cyclic local political conflict. In this regard, San Agustín Loxicha is not uncommon.

Municipal governments and officials are often intimately connected to the lives of their constituents, compared to other state actors and institutions—particularly in a state such as Oaxaca, whose fragmented political geography is divided into more than five hundred *municipios*—most of them small (relative to other states), rural, and indigenous. Furthermore, the majority of Oaxaca’s municipalities, including San Agustín Loxicha, are governed by a system of “*Usos y Costumbres*”—a generic term for indigenous normative and legal frameworks in Mexico. In 1995, Oaxaca’s state constitution officially recognized *Usos y Costumbres*. Currently, the vast majority (more than 4/5ths) of Oaxaca’s 500+ municipalities are governed through *Usos y Costumbres*, which can have various meanings, including an important role of community assemblies, cargo systems, and the prohibition of political parties.

Yet San Agustín Loxicha and its municipal governments and conflicts have also proven exceptional: Several times, since the early 1980s—a period roughly coinciding with the onset of neoliberalism in Mexico—Loxicha’s *palacio municipal* and its occupants (or former occupants) have become political lightning rods, channeling enormous and explosive energies—igniting runaway political fires and sparking unexpected political explosions in their midst.

During the eighties and early nineties, Loxicha’s *cabildo* authorities expanded their office’s traditional functions, transforming certain relations of power, through embracing a form of radical politics and popular mobilizations. During this period, Loxicha’s *palacio* and its succession of triennial administrations gained in visibility and symbolic weight, locally and then regionally: during the 1984

palacio re-construction and, a few years later, with the expansion of OPIZ and its activities in neighboring communities of the Sierra Sur and Costa. However, it was not until the government's accusation that Loxicha was a bastion of the EPR—following its 1996 attacks on Huatulco and elsewhere—that Loxicha really “blew up,” so to speak. In late 1996, Loxicha and its newly imprisoned authorities briefly generated international news headlines, making the region, its authorities, and its inhabitants visible and symbolically charged, on a scale previously unfathomable to most Xiches.

Following these events in 1996, as Loxicha underwent a violent and drastic reversal of the political order and fortunes of the OPIZ years, later cohorts of municipal authorities would generate violence-related headlines several times more. After several years of military and “administrator” rule, a brief return to elected civil government was cut short when Dr. Jaime Valencia, the newly elected municipal president and candidate “for peace,” was assassinated twelve days after taking office. The next municipal president, Lucio Vásquez, was a local pistolero (gunman) and officer in the Judicial Police, and a mortal enemy of the OPIZ. He was later arrested and tried for the grisly murder and torture of Celerino Jiménez, an OPIZ leader, whose case went before the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights Commission. Celerino's case became emblematic of the state and paramilitary violence and human rights violations taking place in Loxicha at this time. From the formation of a revolutionary indigenous movement in the early eighties, to the carrying out of brutal counterinsurgency a decade later, Loxicha's municipal government has, in other words, has persisted as a dynamic, malleable, and volatile institution—playing a crucial role in historical and political processes that seem diametrically opposed. That is, opposing parties took control of the cabildo at different times.

Amongst the hundreds of Xiches who were imprisoned for supposedly participating in the EPR attacks on Huatulco in 1996, many of the harshest and most politically (versus juridically) entrenched sentences were meted out to former municipal officials, especially, members of the 1996 and 1984

administrations. Agustín Luna Valencia and Fortino Enríquez Hernández, the municipal president and *síndico procurador* (prosecutor/justice, and second-in-command), respectively, in 1996, were among the first Loxicha Prisoners, detained on September 25, 1996. And they were amongst the last to obtain their freedom, after more than twenty years in prison, in December of 2016. The last three Loxicha prisoners to be freed, after twenty years, included a 1984 cabildo member (Álvaro Sebastián Ramírez) and a former municipal *agente* (an elected representative for an *agencia*: usually a smaller subject community under the jurisdiction of a municipal *cabecera* (head town)) (Zacarías García López).

Why were former cabildo members so prominent among the Loxicha Prisoners? Why were they so significant, not just to Loxicha's social movement forces, but also to the Mexican state and its military forces? What was the rationale behind giving these elected officials such severe and symbolically laden punitive sentences? The reasons have partly to do with the mere scandalousness of such an incident—government officials accused of serious criminal charges—and they also have to do, of course, with the decisions and actions of federal courts and judges. Yet these punitive sentences responded to more than just a political scandal in Oaxacan newspapers. The rationale and significance of the Loxicha sentences exceeded purely legal or judicial considerations. They were tactics of counterinsurgency, or the result of a counterinsurgency campaign in which the federal government exerted tremendous pressure on state and federal courts.

Ernesto Zedillo, Mexico's president in 1996, declared war on the EPR, which he labeled as criminals and terrorists. In an address to Congress, he quipped that his government would persecute the EPR “with the full force of the State”—the news media latched onto the phrase, while critics observed a substitution of the “full force” of the Law, for that of the State.

In conversations with prisoners, longtime legal defenders, former OPIZ militants, and others close to the case, there was a near unanimous agreement that the Agustín Luna Valencia, the 1996 municipal president, and his colleagues in that cabildo were primarily scapegoats—lightning rod scapegoats, too politically expedient to leave alone. During a visit to Ixcotel, I once asked Álvaro—a former teacher, member of the 1984 cabildo, and co-founder of OPIZ, who has been in prison since 1997—about former municipal president Agustín Luna’s connection to OPIZ, prior to the arrests. At that moment, in 2013, Agustín and Álvaro were amongst the last seven Loxicha Prisoners, the ones serving sentences of around 30 years, after every appeal and re-trial. Presumably, these would be the foremost alleged culprits of the 1996 attacks, from a purely juridical perspective. However, from a perspective of political prison, in which the juridical arguments take a secondary component—what purpose did it serve the state to keep Agustín Luna in prison? Álvaro is openly radical and anti-state—but Agustín cut a very different picture.

When I asked Álvaro, he confirmed what I had also heard from others, including Agustín himself: namely, that Agustín had never been a member of OPIZ. So, if OPIZ was the real target behind the government’s persecution of *Eperristas* in Loxicha, then why would the government go to such lengths to prosecute and punish elected officials—that is, agents of the state itself—if they were never actual members of the imputed organization? It is not a simple case of faulty intelligence. In Álvaro’s explanation, Álvaro and Fortino, the top municipal officials in 1996 were still imprisoned in 2013, among the last seven Loxicha Prisoners, despite having been foreign to his organization, because the state was compelled to make a public example of them. The message, in Álvaro’s assessment, was meant for other municipal authorities in places like Oaxaca and Chiapas, where it feared the emergence of more indigenous radicals: essentially, “if you are a municipal authority and there is a political fire in your community, but you don’t raise the alarm, *this* is what happens to you, whether you were directly involved or not.”

A paradox of early colonial cabildos—the sixteenth century ancestors of municipal councils in modern Mexico—is that the Spaniards imposed this medieval Iberian institution on native populations in New Spain in order to weave administrative nodes throughout vast new imperial holdings; and indigenous communities overwhelmingly adopted the new form, yet they made it thoroughly their own. The town council, an imposed institution of imperial control, was embraced by indigenous communities who re-imagined and re-purposed it as a stage and mechanism for the preservation and reproduction of their simultaneously traditional and hybridizing forms of authority, governance, sociality, so on.

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, municipal governments emerged (or remained?) as critical elements in the construction of “autonomy,” on a community and regional scale in Mexico. Collective rights and autonomy are at the very heart, for instance, of the Zapatista project in Chiapas, whose Autonomous Rebel Municipalities (Municipios Autónomos Rebeldes, MAREZ) and Councils of Good Government (Juntas de Buen Gobierno, JBG) constitute a radical re-imagining and re-purposing of the municipal institution—while the JBGs harken back to the Medieval Spanish concept of “good government” (buen gobierno) and the rebel cry of colonial subjects, “Long live the king! Death to bad government!” (¡Viva el rey, muera al mal gobierno!). (For more on Zapatista Autonomy, see Klein 2015/2016).

As noted elsewhere, the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas in 1994 was a significant driver behind the reforms to Oaxaca’s state constitution in 1995, which recognized limit forms of autonomy and self-government in indigenous communities, through the recognition of community’s Usos y Costumbres. These reforms were meant to satisfy indigenous communities’ demands for self-determination and collective rights, at time when the federal and Oaxaca state governments were deeply concerned with the (perceived or real) threat of another Zapatista insurgency emerging out of, or spreading to, Oaxaca’s impoverished indigenous communities.

Municipalities and town councils have thus been critical as sites and instruments in the construction

of autonomy. Yet if autonomy is a marked and exceptional status, it is because *municipios* are most often not autonomous—meaning, they are subjected or subservient to other political actors or forces: such as the PRI or the other major parties, organized crime, local elites, economic interests. In other words, municipal governments are useful in the construction of autonomy partly because (or at least not unrelated to) they more often contribute to a lack of autonomy, its absence, or even its opposite: domination, cooptation, hegemony, so on. As I noted earlier, *municipios* are often versatile and malleable institutions. Yet the proximity to state power and the “political class” of the *partidocracia*, along with access to state resources and wealth, can have deleterious effects on local authorities and institutions, including corruption, graft, nepotism, *caciquismo*, so on.

In recent years, conflicts and struggles explicitly centered around (or centrally emphasizing) the question of *municipal* autonomy, have included significant cases: In Cherán, Michoacán, a Purépecha community embarked on an autonomy process in 2011, in response to state inaction towards organized crime—, and the Community Police (Policía Comunitaria, CRAC) in the Montaña region of Guerrero. After the APPO uprising in 2006, a year later the Triqui community of San Juan Copala declared itself an autonomous municipality (it was formerly an *agencia* subject to Juxtlahuaca). This case has many parallels with the Loxicha case, including state and paramilitary violence, a state of confusion spurred by the state and fighting organizations, years of *plantón* in the *Zócalo*.

Municipal officials figured centrally and somewhat paradoxically in vastly different political processes shaping Loxicha in recent decades, including the formation of a revolutionary organization, the execution of paramilitarism and counter-insurgency, and the maintenance of PRI hegemony.

In order to understand the people on the ground who participated in the EPR uprising—people who

have gone almost entirely disregarded in the scant literature and public discussions about the EPR—as well as to understand the realpolitik of war in Southern Mexico in the 1990s, while noting the significant similarities and differences between Chiapas and Oaxaca. The latter, in particular, makes it imperative to take a close look at Oaxaca’s distinctive political geography and community structures and the genealogy of local government, in addition to San Agustín Loxicha’s particular political history and culture.

The EPR and the OPIZ should not be conflated. This thesis focuses on the story of the OPIZ, primarily, and that of the EPR only to the extent that the latter deeply impacted the lives of Xiches in the late nineties—in large measure, precisely because a conflation of those two groups was at the heart of the state’s discourse and rationale behind the violence in Loxicha. At the same time, there is no denying the links that existed between the organizations, and the crossover of militants. As the Loxicha Prisoners know better than most, there is good reason to hide.

### **The palace and the dead: Silvano Cruz**

Silvano Cruz, the death of whose son Chuchín I describe in the postscript to this chapter, was a municipal official in 1986, shortly after the OPIZ was formed, during the administration of Alberto Antonio Antonio. In the following testimony, he narrates what it was like to be the sole surviving *regidor* of the cabildo, after the others were assassinated on the road from the highway to Oaxaca, as tensions boiled into violence between supporters and opponents of the OPIZ. Following this incident, the OPIZ went into hiding, embracing an element of clandestinity among its broader political repertoire.

*We are the ones who built the palacio. The old one was just a simple little house made of lámina—corrugated iron sheets. The [contiguous] market was the same. Feo estaba el mercado—that market was ugly and decrepit. Things were calm then, because nobody had the courage to tear this down [despite long-standing promises from consecutive municipal presidents to build a new municipal building and market]. The municipal president [Alberto Antonio] who finally did it was a very brave man, someone who was concerned for the poor. Later on, this brought problems: they assassinated the entire cabildo. I was the only*

*regidor [member of the cabildo] who remained [alive].*

*Yo entregué—I was the one who delivered [the baton to the next authority]. [Before all of that happened] when the “presi” would leave town, he would leave me the keys [to the palacio] and the seal [for official documents]. he would say—“if I’m not here Saturday, you scribble [for me].”*

*[When we were building the palacio,] all the regidores worked as peons (trabajaban de chalán); only the master builder received a salary. Two hundred and fifty pesos was the share of money that came into the municipio. And every person [in the municipality] had to cooperate with ten pesos. [It was all tequio—volunteer work,] and all of the construction [material] had to be brought from other parts of the region: gravel, sand, everything.*

*Nosotros fuimos a levantarlos: We are the ones who went to pick up the dead [after the assassination of the regidores at El Manzanal]. We had to go to [the municipal authorities of] San Mateo Río Hondo because El Manzanal belongs to it [that municipality]. That’s where they were going to make the actas—write up the certificates of death. But they took a long time to get there. It was very cold [that night]. I had to call on [the people of] the pueblo to help out. Some were already there drinking, others started a fire. All I had were some tortillas. It took until one in the morning to retrieve the bodies. But the síndico (judge) of San Mateo got fiery (se puso feo), insisting that they had to take it [the matter (and the bodies?)] all the way to Miahuatlán.*

*My suplente was already drunk, after drinking mezcal without eating anything. This amigo says to me, “¿para qué somos autoridad?”—“what are we authorities for then?” The people were already writing down the information [in preparation] for the signatures, by the light of ocotes (pine kindling) because it was dark.*

*Tomaditos—all tipsy, they went and asked a man who owned a truck to come and pick up the bodies. And without anyone [of the authorities of San Mateo] realizing it, they brought them back here [to San Agustín] at around five in the morning. Then it was necessary to record the information and perform the legal autopsies—but they didn’t do it: They went and took each of them to their homes. Later, the medic and the alcalde (judge) from Miahuatlán arrived: “Where are they?” they asked us. “They’re in their houses” (están en sus casas). But we had the certificates from San Mateo and they certified them. Then they went to look for them [the dead] in their houses, the medic and the alcalde from Miahuatlán.*

## **Dagoberto: The Organization**

Dagoberto used to participate in the Organization as he would participate in a tequio (communal labor), he tells me, sitting in his kitchen in Loxicha. Through this work, says, he came to understand the state of things in his community—but he didn’t go any further than that.

He was there from the beginning: One sees that there are problems. “Back in ninety-six, there were a lot of Human Rights people walking around,” going door to door, “asking questions.” And he worried that



they might end up using those questions against him.

He was there from the beginning: That Organization came here in 1984. Some folks were already holding meetings before then, just a few of them—it was a communist organization, the Communist Party. Then there came another: two young men from Oaxaca arrived, and they began speaking to people. But when the communists came, the people here decided better to make their own organization, but not with them. Its anniversary is July 29, 1984.

They gathered in front of the municipal palace, just those who had caught on. Later, for the inauguration, they brought violins, guitars, and very many people.

### **Dagoberto: On Beto and his Funeral**

The following narrative is based on the testimony of Dagoberto, an early supporter of Alberto Antonio and the OPIZ, although he never joined the organization.

Two of Dagoberto's children, he tells me Ramiro and Magda, were present at Don Beto's burial, in Atzompa—a town on the outskirts of Oaxaca City, where many Xiches have migrated—in 2009. It was a “modest and humble” affair. The attendees went to Don Beto's sister's house there in Atzompa; they were given coffee and nothing more, before heading to the graveyard. There, they requested a spot from the regidor in charge of the cemetery.

When they lowered the body into the coffin, they called on his closest friends, the ones who had never betrayed him. And do you know how they dressed him? In his left hand they placed a Bible; in his right hand they placed his pistol; and they covered both hands with his comandante's cap. It was during his time in prison and after he got out, that he dedicated himself to reading the Bible. It was his will that he be buried like that: with no noise, with no music, in silence. There were about fifty or sixty people in

attendance, as well as all of his children. The youngest, Wilfrido (“Wil”), was seventeen years old. He already had two children of his own. We were very close with all of them, said Dagoberto, nodding his head. He no longer trusts Aureliano (chapter 6) the same way he once did, yet they remain friends, they talk about family when they meet. His feelings changed when he saw Aureliano out there campaigning with Emiliano for the municipal presidency.

Don Dagoberto and Ramiro still take care of Beto’s old abandoned house. They originally left it just as it was, everything thrown around, as it was left the day that Beto and his family fled San Agustín in 1986. They took care of it, preserving it as it was, until Dagoberto gave the order to clean it up in 2008. Then they organized a party and a baile (dance)—and even Beto’s old enemies turned up at the baile. Later they held another one on International Women’s Day. When Don Beto was ill, after getting out of prison, Ramiro asked him if they could clean the abandoned house, and Beto agreed. So they cleaned the place up and they changed the locks on the doors. But the windows remain full of bullet holes.

Beto’s father was likewise buried in Atzompa, and Ramiro was present for that burial as well. They (Beto and his father) are probably more comfortable with a bit of distance from the pueblo, Dagoberto mused.

In 2002, during a barrio assembly, the neighbors of Barrio Santa María discussed the possibility of buying a piece of land near the cemetery that belonged to Don Beto. So Dagoberto volunteered to act as an intermediary and speak with Beto, and he dispatched Ramiro to go see him in Oaxaca. I won’t sell it to them, responded Beto responded, I’ll donate it to them. Ah! they all said, that man is still the same man he once was.

However, he refused to sell his old abandoned house, when they asked him for it a few years later. My house is an inheritance for my children, for my grandchildren, he said. It was then that he gave the order

to clean the house; perhaps he felt that others coveted it because of how abandoned and rundown it looked.

## Post-script: Death in Loxicha<sup>148</sup>

A minor constellation of dim electric lights, spattered across the darkened crests, nooks, fissures and crevices of crumpled valleys and jagged mountains, a fragile ancient spiderweb of solitary farms and silent towns, now sleeping on mountains, between valleys, in the clouds that drown out the rest of the world as though they were sojourners in an endless sea of fog and rock: infinitesimally small boats, floating, ever connected to one another—San Agustín Loxicha, Santa Catarina Loxicha, San Bartolomé Loxicha, San Baltazar Loxicha, La Conchuda, Quelové, La Sirena Miramar, Magdalena, Magdalena, Magdalena, once invisible unto the dead stars, until quite recently, just a few years ago, when “*el gobierno y los ejércitos*,” in all their devotion to peace and progress (the breaking of green branches and the devastation of spiderwebs, the blood and ripped tissue) brought electricity to some of the larger *agencias* and *rancherías*. Now, the distant coastal towns of Santa Elena, Cozoaltepec, some barrios of Puerto Escondido, and even the freight ships at sea can spot the lights of Loxicha high in the mountains—itsself a ghost ship suspended on the crest of a colossal black wave, two thousand meters high: an angry amphibian god, petrified, forever falling frozen onto the thick air and clouds that fill the gaping, yawning chasm between Oaxaca and the Pacific.

On the shoulder of this crumbling giant sits San Agustín Loxicha, *el pueblo viejo*, the first of the Loxichas, the highest and the coldest, a crescent moon of lights in the dark, from whence Don Dagoberto’s gray eyes still gaze out the window at the lights of those occasional ships: drowned cockroaches floating on their backs across the night, smaller than ants from this distance and this height, the furthest point with a view to the ocean, the place where the Sierra Sur begins its precipitous descent, the last place once lost between the coast of Pochutla and the clenching of Oaxaca’s central valleys in Miahuatlán.

---

<sup>148</sup> Inspired by James Agee. James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men: Three Tenant Families* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960).

The sun had scarcely risen above the tops of the cerros to the east a couple of hours prior when the fog began spilling past the houses on the crest just up the road, streaming down from Barrio Tres Cruces and Barrio Cabecera onto Barrio Guadalupe and Barrio San Pedro, drowning the view of the trees, towns, sea and sky. During monsoon season, the clouds tend to come up from the south, surging upwards with vertiginous speed through the ocean-facing valleys, washing over San Agustín's brow and cascading down the other side toward the Coatlanes and Miahuatlán. And sometimes this movement is reversed, and the clouds sweep in silently from the north, from behind the highest houses, softly and quickly, in thin streams, then in rapidly growing abundance like a dam overflowing, until the town and the world is flooded in gray. Around noon ("horario normal", as always, for the official Horario de Verano begins and ends in the cities), it began raining, and kept raining for several hours, thickening and darkening the long patches of green-black moss that grow along the walls of every concrete structure, saturating them so that it seemed the walls of houses would start emanating water at any moment. Late in the afternoon, before nightfall, the rain stopped and the clouds sifted down several hundred meters, settling midway between San Agustín's height and the ocean, forming a perfectly level parallel sea, as the sun set twice: illuminating the cumulous mountains above, the sea of clouds below, and then the ocean sea beneath it. That night, like most nights, was clear and cool and softened by streams of frogs and night birds rising and falling, punctuated by the barking of dogs on dusty roads, the odd cackle of a drunk, and high above it all, a single melody, sustaining, now splitting—a mournful legato of brass instruments drifting above the roofs like oil on the surface of water.

In the uneven spaces between cluttered houses, winding streets, jutting rocks and bare stars, the sound seemed to emanate from on high, across the valley, or from below, in a darkened ranchería, or from nowhere, from the grave. Like moths with heavy wings, the sounds would catch and become muffled in the

dampness of the air. In Loxicha as in every other pueblo around, this oohm pah-pah oohm pah-pah oohm pah-pah of brass, woodwinds and drums wafts through the air on any given day, sometimes weekly, sometimes daily or more, marking the time and contours of local geographies and calendars, both profane and sacred. Most often I'd have no idea what was being celebrated or where the echoes were coming from. But this evening I knew it was coming from across the street, and as the brass and drums abruptly died down, as if exhausted, I knew the rosario would soon begin and that I should head across the street to pay my respects to my neighbor and landlord, Don Silvano.

*Do you know my son?*

“Do you know my son?” Don Silvano asked me on the day that Chuchín died, when I arrived at his house bringing a despensa (oil, sugar, rice, beans), candles and flowers for him and his wife. Unsure whether I knew him or not, having met three of his sons yet remembering only one by name, and afraid of giving the wrong answer, I softly muttered, “I don't think so.”

“Come,” Don Silvano instructed me, and led me through the door next to the counter in the tiendita that occupies the front of his house. On the opposite corner of a dimly lit, empty concrete room, was Chuchín, lying on a straw petate on the floor, wrapped in a thin white sheet, pale as if by sleep but for the white lilies and candles by his head. “Éste es mi hijo,” Silvano said to me—and I didn't know what to say, so I mumbled something unintelligible, a soft lump of sound signifying at once a recognition of the stoic little man's bereavement and a timid greeting for the young man whom I had, in fact, met in his previous life and who now lay wrapped in a sheet on a petate on the floor.

*Chuchín's sadness*

It was the thirtieth again and the rosario marked the passing of another month since the death of Don Silvano's youngest son. Chuchín died in June, just a couple of weeks after Hurricane Carlota tore through Mexico's south Pacific coast, causing devastation as far inland as Loxicha. The storm destroyed the roof over my room—and those of hundreds of other houses, including four belonging to Don Silvano. No one was there to see, but it seems Chuchín's death had nothing to do with the storm, yet his death and the knelling and mournful songs it summoned augmented the sense of devastation and loss left by the storm. Perhaps it *was* the storm and the sadness it left in the wreckage that killed Chuchín, or some other sadness known only to him. All we knew is that he died drunk (as so many men do in the pueblos), when he slipped on a high rock near the palacio municipal, falling backward and splitting his head. The worst of it, the part of the story that seemed to enthrall those who told it and heard it, was that he died on the very same spot where he had already slipped and fallen in a state of drunkenness once before, on that previous occasion injuring his back and leaving him "torcido." As though the first time had been a rehearsal or a premonition of his death, repeating the same act twice—sólo que a la segunda vez ya no se levantó. "Se quedó tieso," as they say there.

Chuchín's sadness was not his alone. Los pueblos y las comunidades de la Sierra Sur están llenos de hombres torcidos por el alcohol, hombres jóvenes y viejos que se van quedando tiesos. Life is hard in the pueblos, and mezcal is cheap and comforting. The Mexican countryside has been in a deepening crisis for decades, and the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s and 90s have had catastrophic effects for campesinos' livelihood, driving up poverty, migration and alcoholism. The Loxicha region and other parts of the Sierra Sur where coffee is the most important cash-crop were hit especially hard by the plummet in the price of coffee of the early nineties and the disappearance of the Instituto Mexicano del Café in 1993, as well as various forms of environmental degradation which has made the cafetales less productive every year. Young men without land can work seasonally as mozos, day-laborers, on someone else's fields, for which they earn

around \$100 pesos (less than \$10USD) per day. Few others find meager jobs working for the municipal government, the schools, as albañiles or driving mototaxis. The vast majority of men migrate, at least once, to find jobs in other cities or in the United States. But for those who stay and those who return, there is no shortage of reasons to despair, and there is ample pressure to drink.

Scarcely a day would go by in Loxicha in which I would not encounter a man (it was rare to see women in this condition) stumbling drunk through the streets, howling alone in soiled clothes, or being carried homewards by his wife or his mother, struggling under his fetid weight, fearful of coaxing too hard: Violence against women is commonplace in rural Oaxaca, and the consumption of alcohol is most often involved, as it is in most instances of “everyday” violence. Around once a week, I would walk past some young man lying prostrate in the middle of the street, completely unconscious, face in the mud, sometimes with his pants around his ankles. And almost as often I would notice a woman with a bruise or a gash on the side of her face. These are the everyday tragedies of Mexico’s indigenous and campesino communities.

This admittedly cursory portrayal of the role of alcoholism in Loxicha, as well as its relationship to youth, gender, poverty and violence, is relevant to understanding the history of the OPIZ (and several of the prisoners) in the eighties and nineties. Militancy in the OPIZ involved a vow of abstinence from alcohol, a point that comes up frequently in the prisoners’ oral histories, as do drinking stories. Moreover, one of the movement’s most popular measures, particularly among women in the communities, was banning the sale of alcohol.<sup>149</sup> This was reversed after the OPIZ was sent back into the shadows in 1996. The stories above reflect some everyday practices and meanings of drinking, particularly among men, their effect on women and their own relationship to drinking and drunkenness. Drinking is not simply a desperate or mechanical

---

<sup>149</sup> A parallel process was then occurring in Chiapas in the communities controlled by the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), where women were also the main force behind banning the sale and consumption of alcohol. Two decades later, this remains a strictly enforced law in the Zapatista communities; whereas, in Loxicha, the Mexican government’s repression of the OPIZ in the late nineties led to the movement’s disarticulation and the end of the alcohol ban. Today, most young people in Loxicha have never even heard of the ban.



reaction to poverty or hardship in Loxicha; it is also a practice that is also valued and cultivated, celebrated in songs, and also deeply enmeshed in ritual and religious practices. Drinking is folded into various layers of everyday life and rituals in the communities.

### *El Rosario*

Two months after Chuchín's death, as the sound of the banda dies down, I know that a group of neighbors and friends of the Sánchez family will have gathered by now and the rosario will soon commence. I put my jacket on and sigh in resignation, sensing the coming familiar discomfort of being the stranger in the room. I find the rosarios very moving, yet it generally takes me tremendous effort to step out my door, as there is simply no place or event here in which I feel totally comfortable, on account of my discomfiting height, pallor, beard and city clothes. The group of mostly women—at least those who don't know me—will pretend not to see me, but I will feel their scrutiny and distrust for the full hour, and only their children will stare and whisper and laugh and wonder where I came from and what I am and then resume their play amidst the long wooden boards that serve as ad-hoc pews.

Stepping outside, the air smells of decomposing coffee pulp—the darkening red meat that gets scraped from the bean and thrown beside the house—and as I near the house across the inclined street, the fragrance of rotting fruit gives way to the sweet pungency of copal, the sacred smoke drifting and dancing in flourishes around the disharmonic wail of the orator who has begun singing in a voice that croaked, bleated, and soared angelically:

*Salgan saaaaaalgan ánimas de pena,*

*que el santo rosaaaaario rompe sus cadenas.*

And everyone in the room repeats (*salgan saaaaalgan...*) in a sad melodic refrain. I take a spot near the back of the room, and try to make myself small. After several verses the orator says a Padre Nuestro, and we repeat; then an Ave María, and we repeat; sitting and standing, singing, repeating: The room is filled with flowers and incense; at the front is an altar and on it stands a large picture of Chuchín with his head still intact, surrounded on either side by white lilies in vases. On the floor by the altar is the censer, which Don Silvano tends to between verses, and opposite him is the orator, a young campesino who also works as an albañil, now bleating and counting the rosary beads with his fingers. Behind them is us, a group of forty or fifty people, including several adult men, but mostly women, young and old, many with children. A few of the younger women are wearing jeans and sweatshirts, but the majority of women of all ages wear skirts and blouses or t-shirts under thick *rebozos* that cover their thick black hair, their backs and shoulders from the cold air. Most wear flimsy plastic slip-on shoes or sandals. Above us is a giant green tarp that Don Silvano and his other sons had to drape over the house for Chuchín's velorio and subsequent rosarios, after the hurricane tore away the tin roof from that used to cover the large house opposite his home. At the front of the room Don Silvano and Doña Carmelina stand like stones, looking at the ground; Carmelina sings almost inaudibly, the look of fifty years of tiredness around her eyes, and Silvano sings slightly off cue, perhaps because of the hearing aid in his ear, or perhaps because he is proud and knows what the purpose of ritual is, knows that it is *his* wretched, deadbeat, stupid and dead, son that they're singing for:<sup>150</sup>

Eventually the orator finishes and bids the group goodnight. The tension that has held this mass of bodies together dissipates with the incense into the atmosphere; people begin to shuffle and chatter softly, and Carmelina and a group of women rush across the street to the kitchen, while Silvano and his sons scurry out past the turkeys, the chickens and the dogs to bring in chairs and three wide wooden boards, which they prop onto "burritos" to make long tables. Around thirty people sit at the tables (at the velorio, two months

---

<sup>150</sup> My portrayal of Silvano's feelings towards Chuchín are based on conversations with him, not omniscience.

ago, it was around a hundred), and the women serve everyone a bowl of caldo de pollo, tortillas (foot-long tlayudas), and coffee. Using folded strips of tortilla as spoons, the guests quickly go through their caldos, which they season with salt and salsa. Meanwhile, Don Silvano walks around each table with an enormous plastic jug of mezcal and a tall blue plastic cup, which he offers to every adult, ranking them roughly by the order in which he offers the blue cup. Many of the women politely refuse, with a deferential “*diush kish-go*” (thank you), while nearly all of the men accept. He makes a second round. As they finish, the women and men say “*gracias*” or “*diush kish-la*” to those still sitting, who in turn respond “*provecho*” or “*diush kish-dios*”. Then they thank Silvano and Carmelina, who respond with another “*diush kish-dios,*” and they leave. I too get ready to go, but the leader of banda, a music teacher from Buenavista, tells me to stay, “*para platicar con los amigos.*” He offers me a seat beside him, next to the orator and another man. Don Silvano comes around and offers each of us another full cup of mezcal, and then another. He leaves a liter-sized jug on the table and a blue plastic cup. The three men begin to speak to each other in Zapotec, most of which I can’t follow, which gives them no pause, and turn to me with a comment in Spanish every now and then. The maestro serves each of us another round, and then one more. Eventually, somehow, slowly, stumbling, we thank our hosts and go, and all that is left is the flowers and the trace of incense and the photograph of Chuchín.

## Post-script 2: All Saints Day

Fiestas set the rhythms and melodies of life in Mexican towns, villages, and neighborhoods. All Saints Day is by far the most important fiesta of the year in Loxicha. Preparations begin on the *octava*—eight days before the fiesta—when all of the Catholic families, and even some of the Protestant ones, go to the cemetery to clean the graves of their departed.

On the Sunday prior to the fiesta merchants arrive from neighboring towns, from the Miahuatlán valley to the north, the coast to the south, and even Oaxaca City, for the plaza grande, the big market, which sets up all along the winding incline of San Agustín’s central street, which goes by the primary school, the church, the municipal palace (hall), and the market hall. Seen from the second floor balcony of the municipal palace, the street is entirely covered by a canopy of blue, yellow, and green plastic tarps and rope. A giant blue-green snake in the sun, its insides buzzing and humming.

The merchants bring truckloads of fruits from all around—apples, tangerines, oranges, nanches, sugarcane, various types of banana, *jícamas*, pineapples, guavas, limes, lemons, *tunas*,<sup>151</sup> and others. They also bring chocolate (to prepare the traditional steaming drink), brilliant *cempasúchil* flowers (marigolds), purple “Santa Teresa” flowers, and *pan de muertos* (Day of the Dead bread). The pan de muertos here is different from the central Mexican variety with its sugar sprinkled bone effigies; in Oaxaca, the egg yolk bread is made to look like a fluffy yellow body—a dead body—though the resemblance would be vague were it not for the pale little face nestled in its “head”. We eat the dead, but the dead must be fed too.

Every household requires copious amounts of food and materials with which to feast the dead and the living that will invariably pass through every house. In the days preceding November 1 everyone is busy, everyone in the family is involved in the cooking and the shopping for materials for their altars.

---

<sup>151</sup> The red fruit that grows on cacti.

“On the day before the fiesta, the 30th, there is a massacre of chickens,” says Lázaro, chuckling and grinning. He had just finished slaughtering six of his own “ranch” chickens (*pollos de rancho/criollos*), of which he’s very proud—he doesn’t trust *pollos de granja* (commercial chicken), with everything they inject into them. A few days before the “massacre”, he locks up his *pollitos* so that they “don’t eat anything dirty.” Yet it’s a shame to lose the eggs they would have laid. Not to mention that the past few days those chickens had been laying more eggs than usual, and he adds with a sly smile: They must have known what was coming and did their best to avoid their fate! The eggs were welcome, but the gambit failed, he sentences. Then he laughs again: These days one can leave the cut pieces of chicken out without worrying about the dogs that roam everywhere, wandering in and out of houses. There are so many bits of chicken lying around that the dogs can afford to not steal. A hint of irony. “It’s a holiday for them as well.”<sup>152</sup> These are the things that my compadre Don Lazo was telling me in the open area outside the SR house in Barrio Santa Magdalena, standing on the worn patches of concrete, grass, moss, and dirt between the tin walls of the house and the iron scaffolding. La Maestra Elvira, his wife and consort, only laughed and shook her head as she began cleaning the naked yellow chicken corpses in the concrete *lavadero*.

All of those massacred chickens and many turkeys end up in the traditional mole and tamales, the basic dishes of the holiday, which are prepared in abundance so as to share with numerous visitors, living and dead. All throughout the 1st and 2nd of November, and spilling onto the 3rd, people pay visits to their *compadres* and *comadres*. Those who have very many *compadres*, like Don Silvano (see Chapter 1, “the palace and the dead”), spend these days at home receiving their visitors who line up at the door and wait for others to leave so that they can enter. They arrive bearing gifts for their hosts: bread, fruit, and tamales or mole. The hosts receive these and, in turn, treat their visitors to stay and eat their own mole, tamales, fruit and chocolate. The exchange takes place primarily between *compadres*, yet anyone who comes by is

---

<sup>152</sup> *También para ellos estos son días de fiesta y convivencia.*

welcomed inside and given food. As they say goodbye and thank one another, the hosts send off their guests with more bags of food.

At Elvira and Lázaro's house, the children begin setting up the family altar early in the morning on the 31st, just one day in advance as the flowers and fruits on the altar must be as fresh as possible upon the arrival of the deceased. Their seventeen-year old son places a table against the wall in the main room of the house, facing the door, and covers it with a white tablecloth. Using two or three long slender sticks, still green so that they won't snap, he forms an arch on the front of the table by tying the sticks' ends to the legs of the table. He then opens the bundles of orange *cempasúchil*—the flowers of the dead—and begins gathering bunches of three or four blossoms and tying the stems together, forming what looks like large blossoms. Once he's made enough, he ties each one to the arch above the altar, artfully weaving them close together so that the arch becomes a florid arch covered entirely by orange-yellow explosions. Other families form a cross inside the arch using the same method, and others tie sugar cane or tall palm leaves to the flanks of the arch. And from the florid arch he ties limes, oranges, and little *jicamas*, with their stems and a few leaves attached to the former so that they look as though they were hanging from a tree.

The table is the base of the altar, and a second or third floor can be added to it. Prior to the arrival of the *muertos*, a feast is laid out for them, along with some of the deceased's favorite foods, drinks, smokes and other earthly delights to remind them of their time on this side: black mole, bread, chocolate, *atole*, tamales, fruits, soft drinks, candies (for the *angelitos*), water, beer, *mezcal*, cigarettes, and other items, according to the taste of the deceased and their descendants. Flowers, fruits, and candles line the empty spaces between dishes and bottles, filling out the baroque extravagance of the offering. Photographs, if they exist, of the nearest and dearest dead relatives—parents, grandmothers, husbands, daughters—are hung on the wall above the altar, or placed on the table leaned against the wall. Lastly, on the floor in front of the

altar, Elías lights candles and a censer with copal.

The children (*angelitos*) are the first to arrive, at noon on the 31st, and at noon the following day they leave and the elder dead (“*los abuelitos*,” “*los grandes*”) arrive—with the exception of those whose deaths were accidental, tragic, or violent. These *finados* have their day on the *octava*, eight days later. Yet this secondary day is subdued, mostly silent, and one suspects that many families simply ignore this dictum and quietly celebrate their departed all together on the main fiesta, regardless of how they lived or died. Movement and time can, at times, be malleable and negotiable, between the living and the dead.

It is at noon on the 1st that the fiesta really begins. As soon as dawn breaks over the eastern peaks people begin quietly arriving at the cemetery a trickle that becomes a stream throughout the morning, and a trickle once more by afternoon. Alone or in groups, they arrive at the cemetery carrying small baskets or plastic containers filled with *cempasúchil* petals, or those of other yellow and orange flowers that grow all over fields and hillsides at this time of year. Some families come with bottled soft drinks and tamales. They sit or stand around the graves so to spend the time with their *abuelitos* and *abuelitas*, sharing that which they brought and chatting, meanwhile teenage sons and daughters provide *norteñas* or *chilenas* on battered cell phones.

Not everyone lingers. They take the *cempasúchil* petals they brought to family members’ graves and walk back home sprinkling leaves all along the way, leaving an ant-like trail of orange-yellow petals all the way from the cemetery to the house, so that the dead can find their way home and to the altar that’s been made for them. Not everyone does this, of course. Its significance too varies among different people in San Agustín. But when I ask Ramona, a catechist at the parish, she tells me that it has been especially important to leave the trails of yellow flowers for her mother since she and her brothers built a new cement room in the

house, where they now set the altar.

She and others have told me that until a generation or so ago, rather than holding Catholic service at the cemetery on All Saints', it was *saurines*<sup>153</sup> who would make a solemn formal invitation to the dead, asking them through *responsos* (in Latin, they say) to join the living on this day. And in this way too, they would bid the dead farewell at noon the following day. While this practice has become a memory, the notion of inviting the deceased persists. "We go and invite the *ánimas*," Ramiro tells me, "as though they were from a neighboring town. We tell them that there will be a *fiesta* and that they're invited, that it's in their honor." Having respectfully invited the visiting dead, they all walk back together, living and dead, from the cemetery to the church for the mass held in the guests' honor, and then home. The chapel where mass takes place is thronged, but many, of course, prefer to skip the procession and the mass and go straight home. Many, women especially, stay home all morning, cooking and awaiting their *compadres*.

The early morning silence is broken by a scattered chorus of roosters cawing and the intermittent *bang!* of firecrackers, echo reverberating through the town and the descending valleys. Throughout the morning the frequency of the explosions slowly crescendos, reaching a climax at noon—at which point the time between explosions is reduced to almost nothing, silence is nearly obliterated—and scattered puffs of white smoke pockmark the sky over San Agustín and to the south, in the great expanse of air and sky over the villages and ranches strewn across the valleys falling towards the Pacific Ocean on the horizon.

That afternoon I paid a visit to my own *compadres* and a few friends. In the house that used to be their mother's, Ramona and Ramiro, whom I had become close with, showed me the altar they had built for her. Five years had passed since she died, yet the profound sense of loss and love that I perceived in the stoic siblings standing before the altar was palpable and emotive. There, Ramona handed me to the censer and

---

<sup>153</sup> *Saurín*: a ritual healer or shaman.



asked me to cense the altar with the copal smoke. “My mother doesn’t know you yet,” she explained, and this was the way for us to become acquainted. Having done this, Ramiro took an apple and a couple of cigarettes from the altar and offered them to me. Then he casually stated that was going outside to throw a firework.<sup>154</sup> Cigarette in mouth, he lit the fuse on the cartridge strapped to a thin stick, swung his arm and threw it upwards spinning into the air. High in the air the tiny explosive caught fire, whistled and burst, sending the children next to us into fits of joy and making the dogs wince.

I asked Ramona if they would be joining the procession the following day, to accompany the dead back to the cemetery. No, she replied, they would more likely go back to the cemetery later in the afternoon because “we prefer to take our time on the return so that we can spend a few more hours with my mom.” One can negotiate time with the dead. Just as when dear relatives visit from a distant town, one can always stay a few more hours, wait for the next transport, or just stay another night.

-\*-

---

<sup>154</sup> *Voy a echar un cohete.*

## Chapter 5. Political Prisoners

### Abraham and Zacarías

This chapter focuses on two Loxicha prisoners and erstwhile OPIZ militants from San Agustín Loxicha serving long-term prison sentences: Abraham García Ramírez and Zacarías García López. My purpose is to give the reader an inside view of the lives of indigenous political prisoners, and of what it means to grow up in a Oaxacan peasant community experiencing rapid political and economic change, to become immersed in radical grassroots politics—at the margins of the state and in opposition to it—and to then undergo prolonged incarceration for it. Abraham and Zacarías’ voices convey the humanity and complexity of the extraordinarily difficult lives lived by these two men, as well as the poignancy of their hopefulness and desire for life. At the same time, my argument, which is interwoven throughout their narratives, is that their voices reveal the living contours and spectral shadows of a void left by a failed revolutionary movement and the reassertion of violent oppression in its wake. In dialogue, these voices reveal the trajectories of resistance and violence. As the only traces of this history of violence, these voices become the sole means of articulating that void and expressing its contours, whilst repurposing it as something generative.

Before their arrests, Abraham and Zacarías were militants and leaders in the *Organización de Pueblos Indígenas Zapotecos, Emiliano Zapata* (Organization of Indigenous Zapotec Pueblos, Emiliano Zapata, OPIZ or OPIZ-EZ), a political organization of peasants and indígenas formed in 1984 in the rural

mountain communities of San Agustín Loxicha, in the state of Oaxaca.

Abraham and Zacarías were imprisoned in 1998 and 1999, respectively. In 2017, after almost twenty years locked up in three different prisons, Abraham and Zacarías were amongst the final three "Loxicha prisoners" to obtain their freedom. The last three, out of a total of at least 150 (and probably more than 200) mostly Zapotec men from San Agustín Loxicha, who were incarcerated in connection with a guerrilla attack against police and soldiers in 1996. Yet, even after the exit of the last remaining Loxicha prisoner, Zacarías, the number of *ex-presos*, former Loxicha prisoners, is far smaller than the original 150-200+, because many former prisoners have been assassinated after leaving prison (exact figures are hard to find, but I know of several cases).

At the time of my fieldwork, in 2011-2013, Abraham and Zacarías were amongst the final seven "Loxicha prisoners" who were still in prison. The stories of four of those final remaining prisoners—Zacarías, Abraham, Agustín, and Álvaro—are the subject of this chapter and the following (chapter 4). All four of them are *campesinos* (peasants) who became political organizers; the latter two were also schoolteachers, and Agustín was municipal president at the time of the 1996 conflict.

The "Loxicha prisoners" were a sort of forced collectivity, cast in police, paramilitary, and penal violence: A frantically assorted collection of convicts—all from the same place, though with varying political affiliations, occupations, levels of education, and commands of Spanish—spread across various state and federal prisons in various parts of Oaxaca, as well as other states, over the course of two decades. They emerged as this forced collectivity, and as a news story, in tandem with what became popularly known in Oaxaca (and more faintly throughout Mexico) as the "Loxicha conflict," beginning in 1996. Although, amongst the prisoners and the other inhabitants of San Agustín Loxicha, "*el conflicto*" is known to have started, not in 1996 with the guerrillas—but in 1984, with the destruction of Loxicha's municipal palace and the formation of "the Organization"—(though some might even argue the conflict really begins in 1492, if

not earlier).

The Loxicha prisoners were almost all Zapotec campesinos: poor farmers, teachers, and several local authorities, for the most part, from peasant villages in the municipality of San Agustín Loxicha. They were arrested en masse following the radicalization and expansion of the OPIZ movement in San Agustín Loxicha, as well as a resurgence in guerrilla movements and government counterinsurgency in southern Mexico. More than two hundred “*Loxichas*” were imprisoned for allegedly participating in the armed insurrection of the *Ejército Popular Revolucionario* (Popular Revolutionary Army, EPR). Specifically, they stand accused of participating in an attack on military and police stations on the coast of Oaxaca, near the tourist resort of Huatulco, on the night of August 28-29, 1996, which resulted in the deaths of a dozen marines and police, as well as several EPR guerrillas. The Loxicha prisoners have always denied the accusations.

The life histories of Abraham and Zacarías, which I recorded, translated, and curated—with minimal editing, in order to preserve their narrative arc, poetry, and logic as much as possible—are drawn from several extended interviews with each of them. We conducted the interviews in 2013, while they were imprisoned in two separate penitentiaries: Ixcotel Prison, a short distance from the center of Oaxaca City, where Abraham and five other Loxicha prisoners resided, and Etna Prison, in Villa de Etna, a few kilometers outside of Oaxaca, where Zacarías was the last remaining Loxicha prisoner at the time.

My purpose in this chapter is to tell the history of Loxicha’s indigenous movement and the OPIZ through the memory and experiences of two of its incarcerated militants—largely in their own words. The voices of Zacarías and Abraham are significant for several reasons: In the mid to early-1990s—before the EPR uprising, the ensuing military occupation and repression of Loxicha, the wave of arrests that generated

hundreds of “Loxicha prisoners” at the same time as a movement for their liberation—before all that, Zacarías and Abraham were “mid-level” leaders in Loxicha’s indigenous movement. After rising through the ranks of the OPIZ, Abraham and Zacarías became members of a quintet of young OPIZ militants, known as the *Comisión Única*, who served in the crucial role of mediating between the leadership, the “compas superiores,” and the rank-and-file of the OPIZ, at a time when the movement was expanding and becoming a regional force beyond the municipality of San Agustín Loxicha. As mid-level leaders in the organization, the members of the *Comisión Única* were responsible for communicating between the organization’s leaders-in-hiding, community authorities, and rank-and-file militants, as well for the actual implementation of the organization’s projects in the communities. They thus held a special vantage point within the movement: as hinge figures and mediators, they had to understand the perspectives of the high command and that of the bases—yet their position was distinct from either of these.

Of the five members of the *Comisión Única del Pueblo*—the once rising stars of a second cohort of OPIZ militants—Abraham and Zacarías were in prison at the time of my fieldwork; the other three had all been assassinated:

Celerino Jiménez Almaraz (“El Güero”) was killed by the Oaxaca Judicial Police in 1997. More than fifty judiciales raided his home in Santa María Jalatengo; they beat his family and arrested Celerino without a warrant. Two days later, his wife, Estela, found his mutilated corpse, which showed visible signs of torture. This case of extrajudicial assassination later reached the Inter-American Human Rights Court, which condemned several Mexican state officials for their obstruction of justice.

In 2003, Lino Antonio (“Marcos”) was ambushed and killed by a rival faction that splintered off from a dismembered OPIZ in the wake of post-1996 state repression. (Lino’s sister, Donaciana, a leader in the Loxicha women’s protest camp on the Zócalo plaza in Oaxaca City from 1997 to 2001, in demand of the prisoner’s liberation, tells Lino’s story in Chapter 4.)

Finally, Ranulfo López López spent more than a decade in prison. He was released in 2012 and assassinated in 2013. While conducting fieldwork, I met Ranulfo one day after running into him on a country footpath; he was descending from San Agustín Loxicha, as my companion and I ascended towards it. I had heard mention of Ranulfo before, in the course of seeking out current and former Loxicha prisoners and their stories, but I was unfamiliar with his particular history. My companion from San Agustín introduced us, informing me that he was a former prisoner, and told him that I was interested in listening to and writing down his story. Ranulfo was enthusiastic about the proposition, almost boisterous; so we exchanged phone numbers and agreed to meet soon. However, before we could set a meeting, he too was assassinated a few months later, on another footpath, near his village of Llano Palmar.

A few days after Ranulfo was shot and killed in Loxicha, the seven remaining Loxicha prisoners, including Abraham and Zacarías, were transferred to a new federal maximum security prison outside of Miahuatlán. The transfers effectively ended my interviews and my interactions altogether with the Loxicha prisoners. I would not see them again until nearly two years later, when they were sent back to Ixcotel (except Zacarías, who remained in Miahuatlán), following a protracted political and legal battle by their families and their network of supporters—remnants and new outgrowths of a prisoner solidarity movement then spanning almost seventeen years.

The voices of Zacarías and Abraham are in conversation here, despite the fact that, at the time of our interviews, they had not seen or spoken to each other in fifteen years, on account of being held in two separate prisons for almost the entirety of their sentences before the 2013 transfer. In spite of the distances in time and space between themselves, the two prisons, and their village homes in Loxicha, Abraham's and Zacarías' stories harmonize; they share traces of melodies, chords and motifs, while filling in some of the silences and holes formed by the narrative of the other. Both men are present as characters in each other's

oral histories.

Given the pervasiveness of animosity, distrust, and mutual accusations among erstwhile *compañeros* and *compañeras*, which has characterized the Loxicha prisoners' movement in the aftermath of post-1996 state violence—it is somewhat striking that the two old *compañeros* and friends remember each other with respect and fondness.

### **Oral Histories**

These oral histories are based on my handwritten notes inside compact spiral notebooks, which I would carry into the prison inside my *morral* during each of my visits. In those days, I could enter the prison most any day and stay from mid-morning to late afternoon sometimes. I sat for several hours at a time with one or another of five prisoners whom I interviewed. I couldn't bring any recording equipment into the prison, so I would sit on a stool or a tiny chair inside Cell 22 or in the patio outside, with a pen in my right hand, legs crossed, my notebook leaned on a knee. I would ask questions and then, I would listen while writing as fast as I could, trying to catch every word. Of course, this was not always possible. However, I would try to write down everything I could, rather than select what was noteworthy within what they chose to tell me, in order to capture as much as possible of what they chose to tell—to retain its inner reason, its refrains, textures, and flows—those of spoken words, orality, deep memory work, and dialogical reflections that took place over the span of several months of regular interviews, visits, conversations. Many days and many hours spent inside Ixcotel and Etna prisons, sharing time and meals, absorbing rhythms, walking around at times.

As such, the oral histories I have crafted here are a reflection of many things, two of which are worth highlighting here: They are reflections (like all reflections, imperfect simulacra of that which they

reflect, but nonetheless careful, rigorous, and honest) of the voices of their co-authors, the women and men whose voices I recorded and translated. In the specificity of their words, they reflect a way of talking, of thinking, of telling stories that is rooted in the rural indigenous landscape of San Agustín Loxicha, crafted and inflected by forty or fifty years of life—in the communities, in fields, in public schools, at work in cities, in leftist political movements, in prisons, so on. They are reflections of those roots and experiences.

Secondly, due to the methodology I described above and its limitations (inevitably, I missed some words, I misheard a phrase; old handwriting becomes illegible; not to mention the many layers of translation, interpretation, and transformations that take place in the process of converting a spoken conversation in time and place into black symbols on paper). Due to those limitations and the nature of testimonial literature, these oral histories are inevitably also a reflection of my own voice, my editorial choices. However, I consider myself less an author (co-author at most) of these texts, than their translator and curator, as well as interlocutor.

The contours become blurred between the poetry, complexity and simplicity of oral speech, and the pragmatics of hand-written short-hand or punctuation.

## I. ABRAHAM

### **Notes from a field diary: The last day in Ixcotel Prison (July 3, 2013)**

I saw the Loxicha prisoners (the six in Ixcotel Prison) for the last time nearly a month ago, on a Thursday, June 6. That morning, I entered Ixcotel Prison in order to interview Abraham, for the second time. I had also scheduled another interview with Agustín Luna, with whom I had conversed already many times over the preceding months. However, while I was interviewing Abraham, Agustín's family arrived for a visit—his wife, his son and daughter-in-law, and his baby granddaughter—so we agreed to postpone our



meeting for the following day. I also spoke with Álvaro, with whom I had the closest relationship and whom I had interviewed the most times, out of the (then) seven Loxicha prisoners. We set an appointment to meet again two days later, on Saturday. I had promised to bring him a tool for the carpentry workshop, to replace a broken piece.

That Thursday, the Loxichas' space in Ixcotel—cell 22 and the outdoor “patio,” the open-air corridor between the cell and the high wall of the perimeter of the prison—had a distinctly homey, small-town feel to it; something almost beautiful.

Over the course of my second conversation and interview with Abraham, I felt as though we were developing a mutual liking and appreciation for one another. *Nos caímos bien*. I was struck by his *sencillez*—his campesino modesty and humility—and by a certain joyfulness and appreciation that seemed to emanate from him, in response, I felt, to my own sense of admiration and sincere gratitude for him, for his time, his words, his stories.

We spoke for a couple of hours beneath the *limonero* (lime tree) outside cell 22, sitting on tiny wooden stools, while tiny stray black ants explored the stools and our bodies, as interns and prison guards came and went around us. Once the sun was directly above us, I offered to buy us a jug of *agua fresca* (sweetened lime and cucumber water), so we walked around the perimeter to the “women’s section,” where some of the women prisoners ran a sort of concession stand offering aguas frescas and snacks. As we sat on the concrete slab bench in front of the barred window that looked into the *departamento de mujeres*, through which they handed us the jug of *pepino-limón* and two plastic cups, I answered Abraham’s questions about my research and how I came upon the Loxicha story. When I mentioned my previous work in the state of Guerrero, investigating historical memory and the insurgency of the Party of the Poor, led by Lucio Cabañas in the 1970s, Abraham asked me if I happened to know three or four *compañeros* from that state. I was not familiar with the names he mentioned; yet the fact that he asked me this question, relating to persons once

associated with Guerrero’s revolutionary movements, gave me the impression that he already felt a certain amount of trust and respect for me—something that had taken much longer to develop on the part of Álvaro, Agustín, and the other prisoners. Perhaps it was the fact that he had observed me speaking with them for hours at a time over the preceding months and sensed that they too had given me their trust.

I suspected that it also helped in this regard that I recounted a funny anecdote to him that Zacarías—the one Loxicha Prisoner then held at Etna Prison—had narrated to me, a few days prior, during an interview, about himself and Abraham. The story was comical—how Abraham ended up getting soaked by a wave wearing nice clothing, while harvesting shellfish from ocean rocks, whilst the two men were hiding out in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec—yet it took place in the context of them being fugitives in the late nineties. Perhaps it revealed to Abraham that Zacarías, his once-close comrade in the Organization (OPIZ), trusted and liked me well enough to confide in me a delicate story that involved running from the law, his comrades in prison—and laughter, in the midst of it all.

As we sat on the concrete bench drinking agua fresca, with our backs to the perimeter wall of Ixcotel, Abraham was making connections between the outcomes of the “dirty war” in Guerrero in the 1970s (when the Mexican government was hunting for the leftist guerrillas of Lucio Cabañas and Genaro Vásquez) and the analogous story of state repression in Loxicha (Oaxaca State) in the 1990s. Abraham talked about how, in both places, the state had rapidly built pieces of infrastructure—highways and health clinics—as part of a strategy of counterinsurgency, but that these were now in a state of disrepair and abandonment.

Abraham then pointed out something that struck me as interesting: that the two cases were similar, yet that people in Guerrero and in Oaxaca are not the same: In Guerrero, the *compas* (short for “compañeros/as”) are strong (*fuertes*); “they know how to resist.” Yet the people of Loxicha had never known such repression, and they were unprepared to withstand or resist it. It was then that he asked me if I

knew those compas from Guerrero, who were once close to his erstwhile organization, during his time as a militant in the Organization of Indigenous Zapotec Pueblos, Emiliano Zapata (OPIZ-EZ).

Then he told me something else that was striking: that in June of 1996, he helped coordinate a “march” of *compañeros* and *compañeras* from Loxicha in Aguas Blancas, Guerrero, during a commemoration of the first anniversary of the “massacre of Aguas Blancas” when dozens of peasants were massacred by state police agents on a country road near Aguas Blancas, on June 28, 1995. It was the first time that anyone had mentioned to me that militants from Loxicha had been present at this momentous event—when the Popular Revolutionary Army (EPR) made its first public appearance, as scores of masked guerrilla cadres in military uniform marched out of the wooded hills and onto the stage, before a large crowd of campesinos, mourners, and leftist political figures, to announce that it had chosen this date, in honor of the victims of the massacre a year before, to inaugurate a new revolutionary coalition in Guerrero and other states in Mexico, and a renewed war of insurgency against the Mexican state.

For the most part, the prisoners and their paisanos in Loxicha were deeply reluctant to mention themselves (or their town) and the EPR in the same breath. After all, since 1996, hundreds of men and women from Loxicha had been sent to prison—or assassinated, tortured, or disappeared—on the basis of their alleged association with the rebel group. Most Xiches, and certainly the prisoners and former prisoners, knew the EPR acronym to be stigmatized and association with it to be extremely dangerous, even lethal.

Yet Abraham and his compas from Loxicha were there in the audience, when the columns of masked EPR *guerrilleros* emerged from the monte to declare its existence, its objectives, and its declaration of war against the government. I wondered what those men and women from Loxicha felt and thought as they watched those other men and women in masks and uniforms, touting courage, *cuernos de chivo* (AK-47s), and revolutionary speeches, knowing that, behind the hooded masks, were short, brown men and women, much like themselves, many of them poor indigenous campesinos, just like them. I decided to save

this question for our next interview; although I never got the opportunity to ask him then.

Another thing that stood out in my conversation with Abraham was his reaction when I asked him about the principles (*estatutos*) of the OPIZ. Unlike Aureliano, the former prisoner who was forcibly disappeared (see Chapter 5), who reacted with visible discomfort and suspicion to this question, Abraham responded with tranquility and even with notable pride, that he did remember what those principles were and that, yes, he could recite them for me. The principles, as he recalled them, consisted simply of three words: Honesty, humility, and discipline.

During Abraham's time as a militant in the Organization (roughly 1988-1996), at the height of the movement in Loxicha, local leaders like Abraham would organize meetings and assemblies in the villages and towns of Loxicha. And they would ask the participants at these meetings whether it was true that they wanted their local authorities to be honest people; whether or not they wanted them to be humble; whether they should be disciplined. Of course, the answer was yes. To that end, then, Abraham and his comrades would respond, it was necessary for them to organize themselves, in order to ensure that their authorities were honest, humble, and disciplined. And if they failed at that, then they should be removed from their charge.

Of the three principles, I find one of them particularly striking: humility. This particular virtue, I would argue, is not one that is often espoused or promoted by revolutionary organizations, pro-democracy movements, or political movements, in general. However, it is entirely coherent and in keeping with the ethos of indigenous and campesino movements, in the vein of the Party of the Poor or the Zapatistas.

It is true that I do not know Abraham or the other prisoners intimately, beyond that which they chose to share with me in our ultimately limited conversations and interviews; however, I do not think it is untrue to affirm that Abraham embodies each of these virtues, and, particularly, that of humility.

We also spoke a bit about me: Abraham was especially interested in my family and my background, my life in “the north,” and my motives for wanting to immerse myself in his community and his prison. He was very intrigued, too, by what I told him about the differences in what constitutes poverty in Mexico and what this means in the United States.

Back under the limonero tree outside cell 22, we continued our formal interview a while longer, until, eventually, the conversation moved in other directions and my notebook became unnecessary, as often ended up happening in these conversations. By that point, we had both shed any remaining nervousness with which we had begun the previous week.

Abraham’s stocky body, his peasant hands, and his broad face then seemed relaxed and even playful. He seemed delighted and bemused when I told him that I had been trying to learn his Zapotec language (Disté); and to each of my laments over failing in this endeavor, he would respond by saying that the next time I returned, he would personally teach me to speak Disté, whether there, in prison, or outside. The five or six phrases in Zapotec that I could muster provoked fits of laughter and a giant grin.

We had been speaking for several hours when Abraham’s wife, Gisela, stepped out of the cell wearing a wine-colored dress, in order to hand him their nine or ten month old baby. Abraham and Gisela had met in prison, and Gisela was also from a small community in Loxicha.<sup>155</sup> Following Abraham’s release in 2017, Gisela remained in prison and was transferred to the women’s prison at Tanivet, where Abraham

---

<sup>155</sup> I never had the opportunity to speak with her, partly due to the fact that I did not speak Zapotec and her Spanish was limited. Indigenous women in Oaxaca have a greater tendency to be monolingual than men, as boys are more often encouraged to attend school than girls, and later men are more likely to travel, relocate, or migrate to seek work, making them more likely than women to become proficient or fluent in Spanish. This gendered language differential also played into gender roles among men and women that largely confined me to the male interlocutors among people from Loxicha, at least, numerically, since my most important teachers in Loxicha were women. Admittedly, however, women are often erased from ethnographies, as Behar has argued; see Ruth Behar, *Women Writing Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

and their daughter would later visit her. What simple joy I beheld the faces of Abraham and the baby as they grinned and laughed looking into each others' eyes. He held up the baby girl under her arms, bouncing her up and down on his lap, provoking high pitched giggles and squeals in the clear air around us. "Do you want to go away with him, *mi amor*?" he would say to the baby, "do you want him to take you to the Zócalo? Yes?" Then he handed the baby to me, without my asking, his face full of pride, modesty, and joy, so that I might also feel the joy in holding that tiny soft body and that simple love of a baby—seemingly, the most treasured form of love for this *hombre sencillo*.

Weeks later, after the prisoners had been transferred to the new maximum security prison outside Miahuatlán, a group of the prisoners' relatives and sympathizers organized a protest "brigade" to the new prison, to demand that the prisoners' children and spouses be allowed to visit them. For weeks the prisoners had been kept unlawfully isolated and *incomunicados*. After the children and wives were finally allowed in, and then came out again, notably shaken by the experience within, I spoke with Abraham's son, José. He said that during his visit with his father, Abraham had cried: "*Lloraba, 'mi nena, mi nena...'*"

Fortunately, Abraham's adult children were on good terms with Abraham's new partner, the baby's mother. So they were able to arrange the necessary paperwork for the baby to leave Ixcotel Prison in order to live with them and Abraham's wife. The baby was born there, in Ixcotel, and there she spent the first several months of her life. Allegedly, she was the last infant that the prison authorities permitted to live in the prison; they would have obligated her to leave the prison soon thereafter anyway, as they did with other infants born in the prison. I could not imagine what grief and loneliness that child would feel, being left practically as an orphan, with both parents in different prisons, or that of the mother who, in the span of a few weeks, saw her partner and her infant daughter torn away, even if not permanently.

However, that Thursday under the limonero tree in Ixcotel, we knew none of this, and there was nothing but joy and family on the "terrace" of cell 22.

While Abraham and I were speaking, Agustín Luna's wife arrived, along with their son, Tony, his wife, and their daughter, who was also around ten months old. Since he had so many visitors that day, I proposed to Agustín that we postpone our interview for the following day. He agreed, but told me not to leave, and they offered me a tiny stool to accompany them by the capillita, their self-made "chapel," an altar with icons of Guadalupe, Juquila, and other saints. It felt like a picnic day: Agustín's wife, doña Estela, sat placidly in a pink dress, as Agustín hoisted a little hammock-crib, fashioned out of a folded blanket tied to two posts and flattened in the middle with a wooden board, and Tony and his wife played with the baby atop another blanket on the ground, feeding her chicharrines. That afternoon, the baby was restless and cried constantly, even when they laid her in the hammock-crib—but this in no way diminished Agustín's visible happiness, while he rocked the crib and sang soft words of tenderness to the child. They offered me a cup of orange soda, and I spoke with Tony about political news and gossip in San Agustín. The conversation went on like this until I bid them farewell and said goodbye to Agustín: "*Mañana platicamos.*"

Before leaving, I went to find Álvaro, as he had offered to accompany me to the exit, as per usual. On the way out, I shook hands with Justino and Fortino, who had been in the infirmary all day due to a fever, and I said goodbye to Abraham once more. As Álvaro and I were walking, we talked about recent events in Loxicha and the carpentry tool that I would bring him that Saturday. We arrived at the jefatura, I stretched his hand and gave him a hug, and I walked out. I left feeling cheerful.

#### **1984. The Organization and the Palace**

1984 was a pivotal year for the inhabitants of San Agustín Loxicha. In January of that year, a new municipal president, Alberto Antonio Antonio, took office, promising popular and radical measures to

improve the conditions of the population. The centerpiece of Antonio's political project was the destruction of San Agustín's municipal offices, the *palacio municipal*, and the adjacent market. The municipal palace and the market were symbolic and functional loci of power in Loxicha, controlled as they were by a small group of locally powerful men, known as the *caciques*—political bosses, merchants, and money-lenders, with ties to armed groups of *pistoleros*.

Alberto Antonio took over the municipal office backed by broad popular support from the poor, rural, and indigenous inhabitants of San Agustín and, particularly, its villages and farms. Antonio's ascension to power upset the established political order. In order to construct the new municipal palace and market, the old palace and market first had to be destroyed, and its occupants had to be temporarily displaced and their activities interrupted. For the *caciques*, this was an affront to their power and authority, and they vehemently opposed the transgression by this uppity political newcomer and his Indian followers. Antonio and his supporters succeeded in dismantling the old structures and building new ones—the same ones that stand today. However, this generated a violent conflict between the two groups, polarizing the community. In order to implement and defend the construction project, Antonio and his supporters began convoking regular assemblies, calling on the people of the villages and *rancherías* to the center of San Agustín for multitudinous gatherings, in which ordinary people were encouraged to publicly voice their grievances and their desires for their communities. Six months after Antonio took office, the early assemblies culminated in the decision to create an organization—the Organization of Indigenous Zapotec Pueblos, Emiliano Zapata (OPIZ, or OPIZ-EZ). Its purpose was to articulate and channel popular demands, including the need for basic services, to negotiate demands with state and federal authorities, to coordinate collective labor, and to defend poor *campesinos* from land theft and from the unchecked violence and depredation of *pistoleros*. However, in the short term, the first immediate objective of the OPIZ—the Organization, as it was commonly referred to—was to support the demolition and construction project, and to defend it from the



opposition of the caciques.

Antonio was unable to finish his term as municipal president. By September 1986, nearly every member of his cabildo—the municipal town council that served as his administration—had been assassinated; and Antonio and his closest allies and their families were forced to flee into exile in Oaxaca City. Over the preceding two years, however, they and the organization they founded had laid the groundwork for a radical popular movement, which over the following ten years would transform San Agustín Loxicha, impacting state and national politics along the way.

## **The Voice of Abraham**

### **Loxicha 1984. They decided to clear the wreckage of the mansion**

*It was in 1984, when Don Beto [Alberto Antonio] became municipal president, he began to convene assemblies, to reach agreements. The previous authorities wouldn't do it, because the people, el pueblo, still hadn't woken up. Before, the caciques used to control the municipal power—people like Fermín Mendoza, Abel García, Ramón García, Serafín Ramírez—they would name their own people, placing them in power. Desde hace un chingo de años!—since a long fucking time ago!*

Until one day the pueblo named Beto Antonio and Álvaro Sebastián. At the first assembly, Beto said, “I want to propose<sup>156</sup> something to you—the palacio is badly deteriorated; let's do this.” There were around three thousand people present, and they approved this.

They decided to clear the wreckage of the mansion—[and]<sup>157</sup> the big market with its many stalls: Abel García had a clothing store. Hermilo Luna's wife sold odds and ends, dress clothes; now they own a

---

<sup>156</sup> “*Quiero propinarles.*” *Propinar* literally means to inflict a beating or something unpleasant on someone. Abraham was likely going for “proponer,” to propose, but the conflation of the two words conveys the severity of the situation.

<sup>157</sup> “Decidieron descombrar el mansón [sic], o mansión.”

clothing store near the Redención de la Raza [primary school].

*The problem started when el pueblo said that we were going to clear the wreckage of that old house. Those caciques already thought themselves the owners of that. A great many people came up from the community [to the center of San Agustín]: They began removing the metal sheets [from the roof]. And they began announcing over the loudspeaker that whoever had a saw, a mallet, tools, should bring them.*

*They started [working] around eleven [in the morning], and it ended around three. Abel García's little room [inside the market] was left standing; and that's where the problem began—that's where unity began. According to Abel García, he was the boss—or, supposedly people used to say that he was the boss—and they wouldn't permit the market to be broken apart. But they started removing the metal sheets, and, two or three days later; they announced once more that he should remove his things. One night, he went in and took all his things out.*

*I was around eighteen or twenty years old [when this happened]. I'm from '67—so I was seventeen. That's why I remember it well.*

*In order to win, and to knock down that group of caciques, Beto started organizing the people. Because in the pueblo [the center of San Agustín], those caciques had many compadres, many comadres. So he forced them to work with the communities.*

*Every person gave ten thousand pesos [as contribution for the construction project]. The peso still wasn't devaluated then. At the age of seventeen, I also contributed. We would go and haul sand; remove gravel; break stones, over by the chapel of Guadalupe, near El Portillo de las Flores. We would give our day of tequio [communal labor]. The municipal palace was built with the effort of all the inhabitants of the region.*

*The municipal palace was so significant—well, because it was so dilapidated. We never even considered receiving help from the government. Every little thing we built through tequio. We would name our authorities through Usos y Costumbres—the people would name them. [The palace] was so deteriorated—and what are the people saying? There are so many people in this pueblo, yet they can't manage to make a better site. The people were thinking, “We are going to name our authorities; that is where they will serve.” We lacked many of those things they had in Oaxaca City like drinking water, basic services.*

### **Loxicha 1967. I am a huerfanito**

*I am a huerfanito (half-orphan). My father died when I was six months old inside my mother's womb. After I was born, my mother passed me off to aunts and uncles. She worked by washing clothes for money, shelling corn. I had an older sister, Elvira, from my same father. When she was seven years old and I was two, my mother got together with another man, my stepfather. I went to kindergarten—it was called a “Promotor” school, in order to go on to primary school. I was very intelligent, so they moved me to the primary school, where I studied the first through the fifth grade. My fifth grade teacher was Cirilo López Mendoza [who would later become the*

*municipal president in 1990-1992].*

*One day el Maestro Cirilo sent me to fetch water for his bestia, his mule. There was a big field just outside the school. As I was walking, I didn't realize that my foot had gotten caught in a rope, which was attached to the mule, which took off running. I injured my foot and then I was unable to finish primary school. My parents had very little money and we couldn't afford a wheel chair:*

*It took eight months for me to walk again. I just stayed in a little chair—en pura sillita. My parents didn't want to send me to the doctor, for fear that they would cut off my foot. But Maestro Cirilo injected my foot with antibiotics.*

### **Limpiando cafetal**

*So I left school and started working as a mozo (peon): clearing land for coffee plantations (limpiando cafetal), digging the plots for the coffee trees (poniendo cajete). I was paid fifteen pesos a day. The bosses were avaricious people, hungry for money, and they abused the workers.*

*There were two ways we could work. You could work on your own and get paid after all the work was done, by the day, or by hectare. It's up to you to figure out when and how you work. Or the other way: if the patrón (boss) is going to provide you with food, he says, "you show up at six, and you work until six. You take your food, or they take it to you, the patrón provides it. Mashed beans, or, at most, chicken soup on occasion. But more often it was frijolitos (beans), or salsita with nothing but chile, no tomato. This is how they treated the mozos. There was no eight hour workday. Each day they'd get paid thirty or forty pesos. Now, seventeen years later, they might get paid \$150 to \$200 [pesos] per day. But in 1994 it was thirty pesos a day.*

### **Loxicha 1982. Servicio: There we realized what equality and inequality are**

*Later on, when I was fifteen, I gave my first servicio (community labor) to the community, as a vocal (speaking member) for the Comité de Padres de Familia (the School Parents Committee). It's completely different from how they do it in the cities: here, you pay for a child's enrollment. Over there, you have to force people to enroll their children. We would meet on Tuesdays and Fridays. The school principal would give the committee a list of all the children who needed to enroll. And the vocal would go visit the families of any child who wasn't enrolled, and they would be forced to pay the enrollment fees, for brooms, chalk, and other materials—because back then, the government didn't send any money.*

*Around the time that I was detained, it was around \$20 pesos that people had to donate—everyone, even single mothers. It was there that we realized what equality and inequality are.*

*[It was a vocal for the School-Parents Committee that Abraham learned the meaning of equality and inequality, he says. As a vocal he would visit the houses of school children to collect fees and monetary contributions for the school in Santa Cruz. Many of them, including the very*

poor; would be forced to pay. “Many would do this against their will. They had their children in school, they were citizens, yet they wouldn’t contribute.” So the vocales would visit once and once again, and the parents would say, “Come back in eight days, and, again, come back in eight days.”

On the day of the clausura, the last day of school, the vocal would report back to the committee regarding the cash closings for the school. And they would share the list of the *renuentes*, the delinquent parents: “What are we going to do? Did the vocales visit them? Yes, they went.” They would then hand over the list to the elected village authority, the *Agente de Policía Rural*, “the authority chosen by the *pueblo* to impose justice on the *renuentes*.” Then, at the *baile*, the annual celebration and dance, they would grab them and put them in jail until they paid. And if they didn’t attend the *baile*, the *Agente* would send his “assistants,” the local police, for them. “They always went at night, around midnight, or one, or three in the morning. They’d find them deep asleep, and they would tie them up with *mecate* (rope) and take them away.”

“The *renuente* would be locked up for 24 to 48 hours, until they paid. And then they would pay—but the next day, the *Agente* was likely to turn up dead. So instead of helping the situation, this only created anger. In administering justice, what the authority gained was death.”]

### **Loxicha. Tequio (communal labor): Unity makes strength**

That is how I came to realize that we, *campesinos*, indigenous people, make use of the achievements of our own labor. At that time, [in Santa Cruz] we also built a room for the teacher. The parents with schoolchildren all donated and helped set up the galvanized metal sheets (*láminas*) and the adobe walls—hauling the dirt. Each day that a school-parent gave *tequio*, well, it meant going to get one or two sacks of pine resin. You mix that with the earth, and it becomes sticky and ready. You set down string, marking off thirty or forty centimeters. It dries out, and eight days later you go over it again. The room ended up being eight by five meters, with an internal partition. And that’s how you build.

I get to thinking, to appreciating: that unity makes strength, or that unity makes things [happen]. Sometimes we also refer to it as collective labor:

We also built a kitchen for the teacher, four by six meters. Early in the morning, you cut *zacate* (tall grass)—later in the day, you can’t because of the dust. *Tempranito*, at the crack of dawn, you cut it down comfortably. Each family brings a *tercio* of rods, a *tercio* of *juco*—no plastic; everything straight from the fields—a *tercio* of *zacate* and of *juco*.

On the day the work begins, everybody arrives! That’s where one appreciates unity—and the modesty of the *compañeros*. If one is not modest, they don’t contribute. It’s consciousness—unity—because that way it gets done quickly. How lovely it is when they get together!

There were three government schools [then]. But almost all of the schools were built by the people of the community. We ourselves would cut the pines to build the benches. There was nothing—nothing, nothing—of support from the government. No *hay pues*—there simply wasn’t. Little by little, we went improving things.

## **The Coast & Loxicha 1986. Everyone pays for their spot here**

*Around '86, I went to work for a time in La Costa, on the coast. I would go pick up little crabs, those blue ones they sell in the pueblo [San Agustín]. I grabbed about six hundred, and off I went with my canastísima, a huge basket, [back to the pueblo] and I set up my stand early in the morning.*

*Then the regidores, the municipal council members, came around to cobrar piso, to collect floor rent. "What's 'piso'," I asked him.*

*"El lugar, pues—the spot. Everybody pays for their spot here."*

*"But, why, if I'm from Santa Cruz? I'm from the pueblo."*

*"No, everybody here pays piso," he said.*

*"Well, how much?"*

"Five pesos." Those who sell chayote, chepiles, ejotes, all pay two or three pesos. Those who sell bigger things, clothes or panela, they pay ten or fifteen pesos for piso. That how we collect money; it's handed over to the municipal treasurer, for cigarettes or mezcal. Because the regidores and suplentes, their alternates, don't get an income. They just get their tostaditas and their coffee. Each barrio (neighborhood or village) [had their representatives; and] each week, one barrio had to do their servicio, [their communal service in San Agustín]. The only thing they get for their servicio—a cigarrito, a little glass of mezcal. Then their week is up and they head back to the rancho, to their farms.

## **We began to organize**

*After those servicios, those experiences, we began to organize. Representatives were chosen in the communities and in the pueblo—and we started coming out.*

Before that, I never knew the sister communities of Santa Cruz [Loxicha], (though I had been to the coast on pilgrimages). Not until the Organization did I start getting to know them. Maybe today there are a

few brothers who think this way, who are afraid of demanding from the government for the things they lack most. But I had never thought to myself, “What is an organization? or, what is a project? or, how does one do it?” I never thought about the how—how to diminish<sup>158</sup> that little group of caciques that controlled the municipal power.

*So then when we started to come out—thanks to the people, thanks to the pueblo—we began injecting consciousness. Out of that pain of poverty, the extreme poverty that existed in the pueblo. We were already starting to realize: “Why are we poor? Why don’t we solve this ourselves? Why don’t we demand that the government give us those resources?” Empezamos a hacer conciencia, we began making consciousness: “If we want to be united, how are we going to organize ourselves to succeed?”*

### **Loxicha 1988. You have to abandon your family**

*In 1988, entré de lleno—I went all in. I came to a realization: that in order to wage a struggle, in order to help the poor people, one has to abandon one’s family. And so, I began to abandon my family. I started going out to organize the pueblo—with Zacarías, from San Vicente [Yogondoy], Ranulfo, from Llano Paraje, and myself, from Santa Cruz. [We did this] so that they [the poor people] wouldn’t feel afraid. [We started organizing so that, in their own communities,] everyone would choose their own representatives. The community has its ways [of doing things], so if it’s having problems, it seeks you out. We began to help the pueblo. To listen to the pueblo. To defend the pueblo.*

Occasionally, the teachers would come in [to mobilize people?], yet they would only frighten people. They’d come and they wouldn’t teach their classes; they’d hit the bottle, they’d shoot their little guns.<sup>159</sup> [Yet] we realized that they did have a structure: they had principals, the IEEEEPO [the state-wide public education governing body], and so on.

*We would say to the people, el pueblo, “Don’t be frightened, the teachers come here to teach; but if they do a bad job, they have their jefes, their bosses—[and] we can replace them! We have our assemblies; if we elect someone and they’re doing a bad job, we can replace them. It’s up to us to make an assembly—y ponemos a otro, and we’ll put another in their place.*

*I went to Magdalena [Loxicha]. To San Francisco [Loxicha]. Empecé a ir a un chingo de*

---

<sup>158</sup> *Nunca pense de cómo para escatimar ese pequeño grupo de caciques.*

<sup>159</sup> *Venían y no daban clase; entraban al chupe, disparaban su pistolita.*

*comunidades, I started going to tons [a buttload?] of communities. The representatives in the communities would summon the people and say, “We’re going to make an organization, the Organization of Indigenous Zapotec Pueblos, the OPIZ,”—(which Juan Sosa Maldonado now directs, although that señor is just taking advantage of us). But that acronym was founded by the pueblo.*

*We started going out. The people are really united. In 1995, we convened the Encounter of Indigenous Pueblos (Encuentro de Pueblos Indígenas), with our sister communities, in order to make the Organization even bigger. We were really united.*

*In '95, there was [also] a conflict in San Francisco Loxicha. [Over the previous decades,] a group of outsiders came there from Coatecas Altos, from Ejutla—Fromencion José Martínez, José Cirilo Martínez, and Efrén Martínez—those men wanted to finance [buy up] the whole mountainside of San Francisco, all of the fertile land. But there were [also other] groups there from the pueblo—Eutimio José Martínez, Luis José Martínez—the ones who were at the head of the pueblo of San Francisco. They were the ones defending, to stop the foreigners from selling all the land of San Francisco.*

*We lacked every service. There was only electricity in the pueblo [San Agustín]. In Magdalena, in San Francisco, there was only sunlight, a rechargeable battery. Once we were organized, we starting coming out and having marches. But we took the conflict in San Francisco as a foundation.*

### **Oaxaca City 1995: These were our demands**

*We organized a silent march, and we secured an audience with Héctor Anuar Mafud, the [Oaxaca] Secretary of Political Affairs during the administration of [Governor] Diódoro [Carrasco Altamirano (1994-2000)]. We presented our demands. [The Municipal President of San Agustín Loxicha,] Melesio was there—this time we did march as “Loxicha.” And we put forward the problem in San Francisco.*

*During the audience with Mafud, I came to realize that they also send people to get assassinated: [At one point,] Mafud said, “Those people (the Martínez pistoleros in San Francisco) just don’t understand. Those people should be executed, because those people don’t understand.” So are these people incapable of resolving their problems? Or does he just say that?*

*These were our demands: A paved road, from El Manzanal [on the Oaxaca-Pochutla highway] to the junction of Las Flores, passing through Santa Helena; electricity in thirty-three communities; potable water; schools; a clinic in every community; sport courts; a hospital; a school for higher education.*

*On all of those demands we have had successes [in the aftermath of organization and the repression]. In 1996, we were given eight clinics, Conasupo [subsidized government] stores, electrification in several communities—not a hundred percent, but many. They built schools, sport courts, auditoriums, agencias (village government offices). These are achievements that we secured—achievements of the struggle.*

## **Loxicha 1985. Land and forests**

*At one point, in 1985, some logging empresarios came into Cerro Gavilán to extract timber. In those days, there was un chingo, a ton of pines. And it was communal land. Another central tenet of our struggle was the defense of natural resources. So we gathered people from all of the communities in Cerro Gavilán to stop that empresario—we cannot allow them to cause harm. In Juquilita and Copalita it gets very cold; people used to live off of that: knocking down a pine tree, making tejamanil [for roofing boards], selling firewood. That's how they supported their families.*

*But this corporation came in, it had its workers open a path. So we went to stop them. We went to Oaxaca City and lodged an appeal with the forestry authority. And we got that corporation out! Although they returned after 1996.*

## **The Principles of la Organización (OPIZ-EZ)**

*The Organization also had its own rules and statutes. It was forbidden to cultivate narcotics or marihuana. No member could grow or smoke marihuana, because they could cause problems with the authorities. It was forbidden to rob, to harm the compañeros. [These were] the first principles of every person: that the people must be consulted first. If these principles are respected, go ahead. Otherwise, it means being honest.*

*The principles [of the Organization] were to be honest, to be humble, and to be disciplined. Those were the three basic, fundamental principles. In the region [Loxicha], there was a lot of chaos, just like today. People didn't want to serve or work [for the community]. We started telling people, "Those are the three basic principles: to be honest, humble, disciplined." The essential minimum for a militant in the Organization. When it came time to elect our authorities, we would say, "Do we want them to be honest? Humble? Disciplined?"*

*If we had not gone to prison, I think Loxicha would be more mature now. When I was leading the pueblo, I couldn't say, "I'm afraid." Because that meant instilling fear in a lot of people. But now it's [become] a large pueblo—[and] they're killing a lot of innocent people. One finds out, on arriving to the pueblo, people say, "They've killed fulano (so and so)."*

## **Loxicha 1986. Conflict mediation**

*Once, in 1986, I was in Mexico City, and upon returning to Loxicha, I arrived around three in the morning. I knocked on my wife's door and came inside. "Come over this way," she said, "because there are some people sleeping over there."*

*"But how? What's going on?"*

*"The thing is, his son-in-law wants to kill him."*

*"Alright, let's talk—what's going on? You don't need to be afraid."*



*The following day, I called on the people who had previously served the community [as local authorities]. “More or less, what do you think of this? A compa has this problem. Facing it alone is frightening, so let’s get the people together.” The topiles went to get the señor [who was threatening to kill his father-in-law]. Seventy-two hours he spent locked up [in the municipal jail]. “Why do you do these things?” [we asked him.] “Why do you beat your wife? Threaten your suegro?”*

*“I repent for this,” he says.*

*“Very well. But if you say that again, I will dispatch you to [the court in] Pochutla myself. That’s why I was elected as an authority,” the village Agente said. The man apologized to his mother-in-law, to his father-in-law, and things ended well. To this day, they all live happily.*

### **Loxicha 1995. Anniversary of the Organization (meeting Zacarías)**

*I met Zacarías in 1995. He is a very intelligent person. He has a great love of animals; he even filed a lawsuit once to defend the white-tailed deer:*

*I met him through one of our marches, on July 29th, 1995. We met in Llano Magüey, at an anniversary celebration [for the Organization]. A lot of people came out; every compa participated. They came from Oaxaca City, from different communities. The meeting began about this time of day [nine in the morning]. As always, we went through an agenda, a roll call, [then a discussion of] the needs of the pueblo, the needs of the Organization. It was all Organization people, supporters—you can’t invite just anyone, because of the fear; that they might look poorly on this. Each member [of the Organization], each compa looks to see if he has an amigo [to invite], [and] finds a way to talk about it, to explain it. Then back in the Organization, they analyze what kind of person this is, that they’re not a pistolero, an extortionist, a cacique—those caciques who would lend money in advance to desperate campesinos, with twenty or twenty-five percent interest. Then, in December or January, when the coffee harvest is dried, they calculate the interest and capital. That’s why we never escape poverty, because everything we produce is given away paying interest.*

### **How a militant should behave (“I used to drink a lot”)**

*So all of those points are brought up at the meeting—how a militant in the Organization must behave: A militant must be honest. Humble. And disciplined. Because we faced the problem that families were being hurt; we were like common folks because there was no norm to follow. Having that norm, one abstains [from negative behaviors].*

*I used to drink a lot—well, not a lot, but on Sundays. Already at age twelve, I was smoking. I already liked going dancing. People don’t realize the threat to their bodies when they drink. The father, the family, the husband—all drunk. And then hungover the next day. And as the body becomes accustomed, so the body asks for more.*

*San Agustín is the place where they go to sell everything. Those who have something to sell take it to the plaza [market day] on Sundays. [So people travel to San Agustín on Sundays to*

*purchase their needs.] But, before buying anything, sometimes one is more faithful to one's amigos and the custom of drinking, than to one's family. The wife wakes one up at three in the morning—"wake up already; go buy some salt, some bread," etcetera. But one arrives in the pueblo and comes across an amigo; they greet each other in dialecto [Zapotec]: "Qué pasó? What's going on?"—"I'm just drinking." Then by three in the afternoon, you lose your senses and your reason for going there. You're drunk. Barefoot. You come back at eleven PM, with nothing. Then the insults begin—and family violence.*

### **Loxicha 1988. Levels of the Organization (I was no longer drinking)**

By '88 or '89, I was no longer drinking—because they'd given me a *responsabilidad*, a responsibility: I first served as [a member of] the *Comité de Organización* (Organization Committee). That person doesn't go out [of the communities on Organization work]; they solely fulfill their role within the community. The only times they step out is for *marchas*, marches and protests. They are in charge of notifying others when there will be a *reunión*, or when *compas* from another community arrive.

*Then [within the Organization] there's [also] the Coordinador, who goes out and reports to the community, to the compañeros de base (community supporters). Compas de base also have their own specific tasks: They get together two or three times a month, and they make an assessment [about issues confronting their community].*

*I started out as a member of the Comité. Later, I became the Coordinador. Lastly, I joined the Comisión Única [del Pueblo] (First Commission of the Pueblo)—that's a great responsibility; because the solution must be in you, the final word on whether something gets done or not.*

### **Loxicha 1993. Auto-crítica I: We were the political authorities**

*Thanks to the Organization, to the experts, the people who knew what to do with a pueblo that was poor, marginalized...*

*Whenever problems arise, [we turn to] el auto-crítica, self-critique: [For instance,] if someone [in the community] is insulting [or offending] someone else; or if there's someone stepping in front of others, behaving badly, hitting the bottle, eating foods prohibited by the reglamento [rules of the Organization?]. Before crítica (critique) comes the auto-crítica—and [with it, the obligation to offer] an apology before the pueblo: "I was hitting the bottle... I beat up another person...." The crítica, [on the other hand,] is when one singles out another person.*

*Around '90 or '91—no, actually it was Melesio's term [as municipal president]—'93. [At*

*that time, in Loxicha,] Melesio [and the cabildo members] were the administrative authorities. We [the Organization] were the political authorities because we controlled the communities. At the same time, we would coordinate with the municipal authorities, [to determine] what can and cannot be done.*

*Back then, when someone received a cargo (a position or service in the local government), they had to be very attentive. If they missed too many days, they had to pay a fee. So we would inform Melesio how many compas would join us on the marchas—in Oaxaca City, Mexico City, Acapulco, Guadalajara... I remember when we went to Coyuca de Benítez [in the state of Guerrero], on the first anniversary of the massacre of Aguas Blancas [when the EPR made its first public appearance]; about sixty compas from Loxicha went...*

*[This kind of organizing] works best when there is good coordination between the municipal authorities and the political authorities. That way, no one gets punished [by the municipal government] for fulfilling their political tasks [with the Organization].*

### **Loxicha 1993. Auto-crítica II: A punishment**

*At that time, it was decided [in the pueblo] that we were going to fix up the Catholic church, because it was cracked by the earthquake of '85. An assembly was called. I was coordinating with the compas on the organizing committee in Oaxaca City. My instructions were to inform Melesio [the municipal president] that he should refrain from charging the people for donations [for the church], because it was rainy season and people had a lot necessities: fertilizer, and so on.*

*So there was a short discussion between Melesio and myself. We met in a classroom in Loma Bonita. We invited the administrative—that is, municipal—authorities, and Melesio himself was present at that meeting. I informed them about the directions here from the compas superiores: that the municipal authorities should suspend asking for contributions for the church, on account of the months of rainy season, in order to resume it later. Twenty-five pesos per compañero [is what they asked for.]*

*[However, Melesio,] the municipal president gave us another option: That he would request contributions only from those who were not compas in the Organization, in order to not abandon the construction work. Melesio convinced me, and we came to an agreement. Later, I informed the compas superiores [about the arrangement]. But they were not in agreement—because the instructions they gave me were to be carried out, not to be modified.*

*That same month, the compas superiores came down to La Conchuda for an assembly of that community. The assembly was called among representatives, organizers, and coordinators. At this meeting, I was given a sanción (a punishment): the compas superiores suspended me temporarily for having modified those instructions. The sanction was eight months in which I was given no responsibilities.*

*As the meeting came to an end, I became a bit upset—because of all the effort, the dedication. I told them it wasn't worth it. I told them that I'd be returning to my humilde casa, and that they could name someone else in place, because [otherwise] they'd just be reprimanding me at*

*every turn. I grabbed my bag and I headed off towards home.*

But [my compas] didn't let me go—Lino Antonio [“Marcos”] and Celerino Jiménez [“El Güero”], el finado<sup>160</sup> (the deceased), followed me. They tried explaining to me that what I was doing wasn't right—because the sanción is a way of correcting [one's behavior]—[of understanding] to what extent am I doing things right; and at what point am I failing? They invited me [to stick with them]: “Don't let it get to you. Now you'll be even closer to us; because in this struggle, you have to be hard, strong, intelligent.” So I accompanied them—community to community.

*I accompanied them. I no longer had my cargo (my charge of responsibility and position), but they would consult me about questions [that would arise at the meetings], and that's what I appreciated. There was never a lack of problems at the meetings in the communities; [so they would ask me,] “Let's see here—compa Abraham, what do you think?” Sometimes I would offer a different opinion [from those on the table], and it would be effective for the compas of the communities.*

*That same year, after [just] three months, we were in the agencia of Magdalena [Loxicha]—and, to my surprise, at that meeting, they lifted my sanción. And they gave me back my old responsibilities as Comisión Única del Pueblo.*

*The Comisión Única [was made up of] myself, Zacarías, Ramulfo, Lino, and Celerino “El Güero.” On occasion, one or two of us would go out to the city [on Organization work]; other times, to the communities. But we had the final word. Only if there was some problem that we couldn't resolve ourselves, then we would resort to the compas superiores.*

This is how I arrived [to the struggle:] with determination, with my heart, [with] love for the pueblo. It has pained me greatly, the way that the inhabitants of [our] different communities have been living.<sup>161</sup> I am against pistoleros. [Against] rapists. [Against] pistoleros for hire. [Against] those who abuse the trust of the

---

<sup>160</sup> It is noteworthy that Abraham only refers to Celerino as *el finado*, although both Celerino and Lino are dead. Perhaps this still speaks to the initial shock and the brutality of Celerino's murder in 1997, while Abraham was still free, in hiding in the Isthmus, thus making Celerino somehow more thoroughly *finado* than Lino, who was killed in 2003, when Abraham had already been in prison for almost six years.

<sup>161</sup> “Me ha dolido mucho la forma que ha venido viviendo los pobladores de diferentes comunidades.”

pueblo. It is for this reason that I gave myself over entirely to the Organization.<sup>162</sup>

### **Loxicha 1984. Crítica I: When I came back to Loxicha, they told me about the Organization**

*[This was] before; because I joined [the Organization] later:*

*They started organizing in my community since '84 [when the Organization began]—and I observed many anomalies [and incongruities in the behavior of its members]: They'd drink. They'd shoot. They'd frighten the pueblo.*

*In '84, [when I was seventeen] I was living in Tahueque, Pochutla [on the coast of Oaxaca]. There, the PRD [Party of the Democratic Revolution, center-left political party] was in power; with Alejandro Cárdenas Peralta. He had great love for the pueblo; although, he had a bronca with the CNC [Confederación Nacional Campesino, official campesino organization].*

*There I learned to participate in marchas; and I also participated in the [protest] occupation of San Pedro Pochutla's municipal palace.*

*Cárdenas Peralta was a diputado (member of the lower house of Congress). He had a lot of supporters, because he had redistributed lands—somewhere around Vejía. Quería un chingo a la gente pobre—he had a lot of love for the poor. But he had this row with Feliciano Martínez of the CNC, who was also fighting for the people, but with the PRI [Party of the Institutional Revolution, Mexico's longtime ruling party].*

*By participating in that marcha, I started losing my fear.*

*When I went back to Loxicha, they started telling me about the Organization. [The question was,] “Why aren't they making progress?” All of us are poor. First, because they're complicit with themselves, and they don't speak honestly about the bad things they themselves do. They lie to themselves. In the community there were 150 contribuyentes (taxpayers), yet only thirty members [of the Organization]. They weren't advancing.*

*Finally, I met Alberto Antonio, the municipal president. And I met Álvaro Sebastián [Alberto's regidor of education and right hand man in the Organization; currently in Ixcotel Prison with Abraham]. Me gustó cómo hablaban, I liked the way they spoke, [and I liked what] they were doing with the pueblo. Yet we started hearing rumors that the people in the Organization were thieves, assassins.*

*One day, a compadre of mine invited me [to consider joining]. He asked me how I was doing; [and then] he asked about who I would get together with, and what would I think if he talked to me a little bit about the Organization? He [then] gave me a pamphlet by the Organization, with*

---

<sup>162</sup> “Motivo por el cual me entregué totalmente a la Organización.”

*the insignia of Emiliano Zapata and the acronym of the OPIZ. I liked it very much, porque hablaban muy bonito, because they spoke very nicely in it. I thanked [my compadre] and I started reading it. Decía muchas cosas bonitas, it said many very nice things—yet these were not the things that those compañeros were saying back in the community [Santa Cruz].*

*My compadre, Baldomero Alonso Luna, invited me once more. Eight days later [after our first talk], he asked me again if I'd read the pamphlet. I told him I did, and that I liked it very much. [So he said to me,] "Be prepared when the compas superiores come around, and you introduce yourself."*

### **Loxicha 1988. Crítica II: In those pamphlets there's a very important little word**

*In the early years [of the Organization], the pueblo was divided because the contenders for the Organization would obligate the compas to give [monetary] contributions—yet they wouldn't use that towards demanding that the Mexican State provide solutions to the necessities of the community. So we were divided [for and against the Organization in Santa Cruz]. We were a group of around fifty.*

*At that time, I was in charge of the Comité de Pequeños Productores de Café, the coordinating committee for a coffee growers cooperative, of around thirty-six farmers. The people have a lot of trust in me because [they knew] I was an honest man in that project. So [in Santa Cruz] there was a group with the Organization and our group. At the assemblies, we would say, "We have to allow space for the poor compas to voice their opinions. Because in the communities there are people who have means and others working de sol a sol, dawn to dusk." That was our argument. [Whereas] the other group would say, "We're going to dictate what needs to be done, and not the people with limited means."*

*But [then] we would say, "En esos folletos hay una palabrita muy importante: igualdad—in those pamphlets there is a very important little word: equality. And it's true—in this community, we're going to respect that word. We're going to allow everyone to voice their opinion, everyone to express themselves. Because, if we don't, from what little we know, we're becoming the worst of the caciques. We're trampling over the ones who are most unfailing with their tequios and cooperaciones, their communal labor and contributions. Because those who do have the means have the means are [always] the last to pay. If you want to put that word—equality—into practice, then here there can be no pobres, no poor people [and rich people], no fat and thin. If they don't know how to read, there should be no distinction [in how they're treated]. We are going to take everyone into consideration; we're going to help everybody."*

*We would say, "Those who are afraid to be transparent about how those in the Organization are working, after three years—[they are the ones causing this discrimination against the poor, through hypocrisy]."*

### **Loxicha 1988. Crítica III: At that moment they realized I was already a member of the Organization**

*Eight days later, I ran into the compas superiores—it was el compañero Álvaro [Sebastián]*

*and others from different communities. I was so happy to see the compañero once more—after so many troubles with the caciques, I thought he was dead! This was in '88 [two years after Alvaro and Alberto were forced to abandon the municipal government and go into hiding, following the massacre of the other cabildo members at El Manzanal].*

*We talked throughout the entire day [about this question]: “Why does [the organizational work in] this community [Santa Cruz] not advance? There are only thirty [compas in the Organization here]. What do you think?” [they asked me].*

*“Well, I have thirty six coffee producers under my charge” [meaning that people are organizing, but not within the Organization].*

*We called an assembly that night, and I addressed the newcomers [principiantes] in the Organization: “Why do the members of the Organization not abide by the principles of the Organization? You drink, you insult [people], you shoot [your guns], you intimidate. Why do you treat us this way?”*

*Around that time, on All Saints' Day, a compa who was later here [in prison with us], Estanislao, stabbed his uncle with a “cero cero siete” knife while he was drunk. He reacted the next day, and he said to his uncle and aunt, “Don't tell anybody or I'll kill you”—but he offered to pay for his uncle's treatment. The next day, the señora came to speak with me: “What am I going to do? His wound is becoming infected.”*

*So I took advantage of that assembly [to question the members of the Organization]. I said, “your compas in the Organization are not fulfilling their duty. Estanislao injured [his uncle] Ciriaco, and he has not sent the compa to get cured. But they won't see a doctor because they received threats.” Immediately after this, they detained [Estanislao] and took his statement about the stabbing.*

*At that moment, they realized that I was already a member of the Organization. [And then] they named me Coordinador [for the community of Santa Cruz], because they saw that I was better prepared than they were. That's how I started out [in the Organization]. They community trusted me, [because] we would do things in the light of day, using the loudspeaker [for announcements and invitations to events]. [In my new capacity as a coordinator for the Organization] I started going out [to the communities].*

*They warned Estanislao, “If anything happens to Abraham, you will be responsible. Be like brothers. Acknowledge your error.” But I would still watch my back. I learned to lie to people that I'd meet on the path: “Where are you going? What time are you coming back? Are you going to the pueblo [San Agustín]?” There was a lot of distrust and suspicion—there is no need for people to be asking what time you're coming back [home].*

*That is how I started out. They came and stayed [in my community] one time, and [from that moment on] I set off on the path with the movement. And that's how I gained their respect. Because an honest leader doesn't shroud someone who commits errors. I feel that by hiding those things, you bring yourself down to the same level as him—and he's going to drag you down with him.*

*Equality means not privileging anyone but, rather, letting the effort and the work make the difference.*

### **Loxicha 1995. Comisión Única: We gained prison or death**

It wasn't until '95 that they elected me for the Comisión Única.<sup>163</sup> The five of us—Zacarías, Celerino, Ranulfo, Lino, and myself—were named at the same time.

*They named us [first] because we were men who knew how to cooperate—with the community. [Who knew how] to serve. [Who were] attentive to the needs of the community. And [secondly] because we were completely in agreement with the project of this struggle. Because we are actually living with the reality of discrimination and marginalization; and we lack every service: education, health, economic [support? lo económico]. Exploitation is something that were actually living.*

*That's why we were happy [to realize that when we are] organized, we can accomplish many things. We thought that the cúpula of those caciques was like a gigantic rock—but if we all push against it, we can move it. We can see change. And so that's how we did it!*

### **Mexico City 1996. I am a campesino**

*In Mexico City we had an audience with the Secretaría de Gobernación. "I am a campesino," I said, "with difficulty I learned to speak Spanish."*

*After the first arrests, when eleven people were detained [in Loxicha] on September 25 [1996], we had to go out onto the streets [in Oaxaca City]. From there we went to Mexico City around the 11 of October, [and stayed there] for about three weeks. Secretary [of the Interior, the second most powerful federal official, after the president] Chuayfett Chamorro was there, but we were received by Sub-secretary Juan Burgos Pintos. There were about three hundred of us [camped out in the streets] in Mexico City.*

Later, we went back [to Loxicha], because our traditional fiesta of All Saints' Day was approaching.

We went back around October 28, '96. On our way, the compas went to pick up their muertitos, their beloved departed, and went to celebrate in the communities.<sup>164</sup>

---

<sup>163</sup> Of the five men in the *Comisión Única* of the OPIZ in 1995, three had assassinated in or near Loxicha, one of whom had recently been released from prison, and the other two were still in prison at the time of the interviews, in 2013.

<sup>164</sup> *De paso los compas llevaron sus muertitos y fueron a celebrar a las comunidades.*



## Loxicha 1996. Repression I: These were achievements of the struggle

*The attack on La Crucecita Huatulco made the government solve the problems [affecting] other pueblos too, not just Loxicha. These were achievements of the struggle. [For the instance the arrival of government aid programs:] Oportunidades, Procampo, Escuela Abierta, Setenta y Más. The attack forced the government to start dedicating resources to the people most in need. All of the pueblos in the region—Santa Catarina [Loxicha], San Bartolo, San Baltazar—are pueblos that have benefited today from the Organization.*

*Before '96, they would barely dispense anything from Ramos 18 and 33 [which regulate municipal appropriations of federal and state budgets]—maybe 30 or 40 thousand [pesos]. Now they send millions of pesos.*

The problem now for the community, for the poor people, is that the repressive apparatus [of the state] decimated our work and our organization.<sup>165</sup> The people scattered in their communities. And the [municipal] authorities mishandle those resources [from the federal and state governments that now swell the municipal coffers]. Today you see those schools [in Loxicha], but they're falling apart, unpainted. The benches and other materials are unusable. And it doesn't dawn on the people in authority now that those resources are for the communities. Instead of keeping those schools well maintained, they use those resources political campaigns. The municipal presidents [now] hide. They don't remember who gave them the vote. They forget about the barefoot children. Those 100 or 150 million [pesos], where does it go? What do they use it on? It goes to buying more votes and grabbing more resources.

*They use [that money] to buy friendships. We [prisoners] don't accept it, we want nothing to do with it. But we know that [some of] our compañeros have taken [money from them]. We know that the necessity [poverty] is great.*

*These [politicians] are people who know how to speak well, [who are good with words]: They'll say, "How many children do you have? Here, take 150 thousand pesos." But that citizen [once they take the money] can no longer speak. Calladito, not a sound. They can no longer write letters to the press. Calladitos. They can no longer [go out in] support of the people.*

[The recent municipal presidents] Óscar [Valencia], "Chucho" Martínez, Flavio [Pérez]—how many compadres do they have? Óscar buys people, that is his maña, his trick. He asks, "Do you work?"

---

<sup>165</sup> *El aparato represivo nos escatimó [sic] el trabajo y la organización.*

What do you lack?” 100 thousand pesos is nothing [to them]; it’s like hair off a cat’s back.<sup>166</sup> They prefer that the people be calladita, comprada, silent and bought off—instead of them saying, “we can be strong.”

### **Loxicha 1996. Repression II: I had to leave the legal struggle and go into hiding**

*Before, as Zacarías was telling you [in his interview with BRH], we participated in the protests when Felipe Martínez Soriano [celebrated leader of leftist movements since the 1970s in Oaxaca] was imprisoned. Also when Canseco Ruiz [former guerrilla leader] of the Party of the Poor; was imprisoned. They were people who gave us that idea [and inspired us]. After he got out, Canseco came to see us [in prison], in '99. We participated in every march that the teachers union organized for the liberation of incarcerated militants of the PROCUP-PDLP. [But we didn't go out as OPIZ or Loxicha.]*

*Once the repression came, then we started going out [publicly to protest] as “Loxicha,” [but only] after the confrontation [between the EPR and the government]. Then the attorney general issued arrest warrants. The arrests began, and the confessions under torture.*

*It was [at that point] in '96 that I finally had to abandon the legal struggle and go into hiding. Because, until then, I used to go down [to the communities], I participated in the negotiations with the [state] governor. [But] by 1997, I was already in hiding.*

*I went to Mexico City. By October, November of '96 I couldn't go near the plantón [the Loxicha protest camp] in front of [the Secretaría de] Gobernación. I was very cautious there, and I would rarely go near it. I spent three months in Mexico City, while the compas there were trying to secure asylum for me in France. But I was not up for it. I was going to an exile. I started thinking about the promise I made to the communities and pueblo, the compañeros I gave my word to. What we won for ourselves was prison or death.*

*All of this went through my mind when they offered to take me to France. They let me think about it for fifteen days, and then I said, “No, I'm going back to my pueblo, because if I go to France, it would be an act of cowardice. They are disappearing my people, killing them. If I leave now, what face will I have to show when I return? They'll call me a traitor, a coward. All of that time and energy, the abandonment of my family, the government will never give that back to me. But at least I will have the respect of my pueblo. Because, as [Independence leader] Vicente Guerrero said, ‘The voice of my mother is sacred, but my patria, my fatherland comes first.’”*

*When I left [home and went into hiding], my mother would say to me, “Don't leave. Why are you doing this? Why are so many people [soldiers] coming here [looking for you now]? Those people didn't used to come here. There is land here, you should get to work.”*

*And I would say, “Mami, I love you all very much, but I have a commitment with my pueblo. We are exploited, we are backwards, because of the very people of the pueblo.” I managed*

---

<sup>166</sup> *Es como quitarle el pelo al gato.*

*to convince her, and I told her, “I’m very sorry, but I have to go on, not leave things halfway. I have to fight against poverty. I have to fight the government. If the pueblo doesn’t wake up, the government will never pay attention to us.”*

*All those things went through my mind during those fifteen days. It would be lovely going to France; I’d get to the city, get to know the country. But it wouldn’t just be for a few days. I would rather die, and not abandon the compañeros. So I had to go back. I made my way back, and made this clarification to the compas [in the community]: “The government is using the repressive apparatus to find all of us. If the government comes looking for me one day, tell them where I live, that my name is such, and that this is what I fight for.”*

### **Loxicha 1997. Repression III: All Saints’ Day**

One 20th of June of ’97, more than three thousand ejércitos, soldiers surrounded my community, Santa Cruz. And they took away fifty people. They also took another twenty from La Charca, four kilometers from Santa Cruz. There they interrogated all of them, and sent seven of them to the municipal building. After another interrogation there, they send three to the Procu’, the Attorney General’s—indigenous people who didn’t speak any Spanish. They were tortured, and they were released three days later. They asked them if they knew me: “Yes, [they responded] he’s from the community. He’s very obliging in his service.”<sup>167</sup>

Abraham was arrested when he returned to his home in Santa Cruz on All Saints’ Day.

*It was a great sadness. One All Saints’ Day in ’96 [’97?], I returned to the pueblo, after five months of not seeing my family...*

### **Loxicha 1980. Basketball: “That’s how I realized that the authorities sell justice to the highest bidder”**

This is an anecdote from [the time] before the Organization. I was thirteen or fourteen years old. I

---

<sup>167</sup> *Es muy servicial.*

have always liked playing basketball.<sup>168</sup>

*We used to go down to the school court. Whoever loses buys refrescos (soft drinks); whoever wins drinks. [That day,] we were three cousins, all schoolmates. The other team was all grown up folk. [After the game] instead of refresco, we started drinking mezcal, maybe around seven PM. There was a cantina about three hundred meters from the school.*

*Around eight [o'clock] I dropped a five peso coin. "Loan me your candle," I said to the bartender. "What are you looking for?" asked one [of the men with us] named Juan. "Five pesos," [I replied].*

*"You're so poor that you're [crawling on the floor] looking for five pesos." Then we got to fighting. The following day, this Juan came by my house to say that I'd loosened [some of] his teeth. Then the Policía Rural, the Municipal Police showed up. But I went to hide, so they grabbed my jefe (step-father) and my cousin. And they took them to the [municipal] jail.*

*Juan's brother was a teacher, so he knew how to write. He wrote up a statement saying that we had tried abducting Juan's wife and that we were armed. But we were just school kids, and they were grownups. They bribed the síndico, the municipal prosecutor [?], so that he would charge us a hefty fee. [My father and cousin] spent four days in jail. My uncle went to speak with the municipal president, Feliciano Enríquez, to ask why the matter was taking so long [keeping them in jail].*

*"Where is that statement?" he asked the síndico. He gave no answer. My uncle asked again. [Reluctantly, the síndico said] "It's there in that drawer." He and suplente (alternate) síndico read the two statements, and the suplente says, "Call the teniente (deputy) and bring the two who are locked up." Then Feliciano, the municipal president [got involved and] said, "That's enough. You go back to your rancho (farm), take a bath, and come back in four days. Because for four days I'm going to lock up Juan's wife."*

*They came back four days later, and Feliciano said, "This matter [the jail sentence] got prolonged because Juan's brother paid off the síndico, and Juan's wife signed the papers. They fabricated the crime."*

*"Why did you sign?" they asked [they then asked Juan's wife]. "Because Juan said that it was the only way to punish the boys. And he drinks a lot. But none of it was true. Please forgive me." "He doesn't love you," [they told her], "Why do you pay attention to him?"*

*They all signed the statement of agreement, and the matter ended there. That was how I came to realize that the municipal authorities sell justice the highest bidder. It starts there. Nowadays, when the brother of the presidente or the síndico commit a crime, murder someone, they feel untouchable. [But] not in the days of the Organization, they didn't.*

*All of that helped me to see how the pueblo used to be, and how it is now—and how it was in the days of the Organization. Before, that's how it used to be: justice for the highest bidder. [But] the Organization taught us how a united pueblo should be.*

---

<sup>168</sup> Basketball is the most popular sport in many indigenous communities in Oaxaca, particularly in mountainous communities where the lack of flat earth makes basketball easier than soccer.

### **Ixcotel 2013. Consciousness: When I get out I don't know I'll be able to trust**

*When I get out, I don't know who I'll be able to trust. My best comrades are all bought off. Those with whom I used to eat frijolito (beans), tortilla, salsita, who used to sleep in the mud together. I, who had to abandon my family, my children, who work here [in prison] day and night. Perhaps it's because I am consciousness [sic]. Ni madres! hell no!—I prefer to eat rancho (prison food), I prefer to eat tortilla with salt, rather than sell my consciousness, rather than betray my ideals of struggle. Or else I could beg, call the [municipal] presidente—I [still] have influence; everybody knows me. But what will the pueblo speak about me later? [Some of those] old comrades have come by [the prison] to pay their regards, and I have said to them, “Take resources for schools, for sport courts—but don't sell your consciousness. Better, let's go sow!*

*My children are here [in Oaxaca] now. When I get out, I'm going to look for work, to refresh my mind, gather everything I need to work—with the idea of going back to organizing. But no longer trusting those people who went rotten, who sold out.*

*In '95, '96, we saw so much poverty in the communities. [In the Organization] we used to make botequines [sic], first-aid kits. [And] we would do communal labor: whoever could would pitch in for insecticide, fertilizer, [etc.]. Through tequio, we would spray [fertilizer]. When we planted, everyone [would come out]. When we harvested, everyone came to the pisca, to shell [corn], to the milpa, the corn and squash field.*

*People would earn their three or four thousand pesos [through their work]: “What are we going to do with that money?” [we would say]. “Let's buy medicines. Who knows how to give injections?” We would come here [to Oaxaca] to buy boxes of medicine. We would also sell it, but affordably. Because the caciques also sold [medicine], but triple the price. This way, the Organization started to organize its own money. That's how we would do everything, all of our work, in a bunch of communities. But we never asked the municipio for anything.*

### **Ixcotel 2013. Transfers**

*Next interview:*

*Time in hiding, arrest, torture, prison.*

*Next Thursday [July 13, 2013].*

*Bring mangos or pears.*

Those were the last words I wrote in my notebook, at the end of Abraham's testimony and our interview, that Thursday in Ixcotel. However, the "next interview" never happened. That same night, hours after my daytime visit with Abraham and the other Loxicha prisoners, all seven Loxicha prisoners (the six in Ixcotel and Zacarías in Etna) were transferred, along with dozens of other federal prisoners, from state penitentiaries across Oaxaca to a new, actually yet-unfinished federal prison (Centro Federal de Rehabilitación Social, CEFERESO 13)—a massive, privately funded, American-model prison, recently erected on expropriated farmland in Mengolí, just outside of the large town of Miahuatlán, midway between Oaxaca City to the north and the road—paved and decrepit—to San Agustín Loxicha, heading south on the highway to Pochutla, towards the coast.

There was no warning (although the prison authorities were legally obligated to notify both the prisoners and their immediate family). In spite of the rumors that had been circulating for months, the transfers came as a shock to the prisoners, their families, and their network of friends and comrades (myself included). That afternoon, when I interviewed Abraham, the prisoners all seemed at ease: Abraham with his infant daughter under the limonero, Agustín with his wife, children and infant grandchild in shade by their altar, Álvaro with his daughter, Erika, and her partner, up in the attic he built for himself and Fortino inside cell 22—"the Loxichas' cell," since 1996.

Around 11 o'clock that night, Erika and her partner called my cell phone. The call was distraught and urgent. They told me that the prisoners were being transferred at any moment and asked me to come down to the gates of Ixcotel as quickly as possible. I got dressed and drove from my apartment in the center of Oaxaca to Ixcotel—maybe 10 minutes, without traffic at that hour. I parked a short distance away in the pueblo of Santa María Ixcotel, and walked to the gates of Ixcotel Prison. C. & K. and perhaps ten other prisoners' relatives—the few who received a call or a text message from a prisoner's secret cell phone, minutes before the Federal Police raided Ixcotel—standing anxiously, fretfully, in the street, several meters

across from the gate, where the state policemen shone blinding spotlights at us and into the night, beyond which three or four Federal Police buses were parked, engines on, lights and head beams shining in the dark, near the main entrance to the prison, awaiting a long line of thoroughly roughed up prisoners. There was nothing we could do. I'd never seen C. cry before.

An hour or two after midnight the armored buses drove out the gates of Ixcotel, amidst a caravan of armored pickups loaded with turreted machine guns and heavily armed, balaclava-clad federal police—headed nobody knew where, because none of the authorities would release this or any other information to the desperate relatives, for days to come.

The following morning, C. & K. asked me to help them recover Álvaro's belongings from cell 22. We arrived early and proceeded to tear down what the Loxicha prisoners had constructed inside that concrete block, in order to make it a habitable space, over the span of more than fifteen years. C. & K. wanted to tear everything down, and we tore down everything we could, so that the prison authorities would not be able to appropriate it.

At that moment began another episode in the storied struggle of the Loxicha prisoners, their families and their allies, a new episode of repression and terror, another iteration of mobilization, struggle, and solidarity.

## II. ZACARÍAS

### **Notes from a field diary: Etna State Prison (June 2, 2013)**

Inside Etna Prison, by the basketball/soccer court, they are celebrating something. A birthday. They

are eating mole and cutting a cake. Now the rondalla, a quintet of serenaders, starts to play. Zacarías is playing the guitar, together with three other guitarists and an accordionist: They are playing old rancheras, románticas, and canciones de borrachos, drinking songs (although no one is drinking, presumably). On the court, five men are playing a cascarita, a pick-up soccer game. Through the main gate of the prison, women are walking in with children who run to embrace their fathers. At the food stalls, they are sitting down and ordering refreshments: memelas and aguas frescas. There is a feeling of placid tranquility in the warm clear air, the ambiance of a small town plaza on a Sunday. Fútbol, music and singing, food, children playing. Men sitting under the shade of sheet metal roofs. In the air, a gentle fusion of accordion and the laughter of girls playing.

Unlike Ixcotel Prison, there is less bustling movement here: No one shouts, “Güero!”, as I walk by, or asks me for a monedita, pocket change. I notice fewer yellowish faces, fewer sunken eyes; fewer guards patrolling the grounds, staring at me, or looking down from high turrets. There are changarros, little food stands, and eateries here too, but there appears to be less commercial activity here than in Ixcotel. I only see a few men tejiendo balón (sewing soccer balls); one man walking around selling pens lined with woven flower designs. Only the carpentry workshop generally seems to bustle with activity more than other areas of the prison, even on a Sunday.

Zacarías is the master carpenter of the shop. He tells me that he provides employment to eight other people working under him. He sells a lot; he is constantly working on orders for furniture. The first time I visited him, several weeks ago, he told me that he started out de cero, from nothing. He would send his wife to all of the pueblos around the Etna Valley, trying to sell a piece of furniture, until someone would buy something. These days, he has many regular customers among the furniture stores and shops in La Central de Abastos, Oaxaca City’s large central market and supply center. Some of his pieces are sold in La Central; others are sold around the Centro, by men toting gravity-defying heaps of wooden furniture on dollies



behind them through the streets of the city center. By all appearances, Zacarías enjoys some fame as a skilled master carpenter. Unlike Álvaro in Ixcotel, for whom carpentry is more of a practical trade and a hobby, for Zacarías it seems to be a vocation.

There are rumors that all local prisoners facing federal charges, including the Loxichas, may soon be transferred to a new privatized federal prison outside Miahuatlán: Álvaro, ever confident and jovial, says that he is excited by the prospect of going to Miahuatlán, “to experience something else,” and see what workshops they have there. A few weeks from now, they will be transferred, but it will be a shocking surprise; and Álvaro’s confidence, joviality, and dreams of new workshops will be crushed by the severe reality of the maximum security prison. Nor do I know in this moment that this will be my final interview with Zacarías, for that reason.

## **The Voice of Zacarías**

### **Loxicha 1986. When I joined at the age of fourteen**

*When I first join the struggle, at the age of fourteen, I join the Organización de Pueblos Indígenas Zapotecos, Emiliano Zapata [OPIZ-EZ]—“la ópiz eh zeta,” with a dash [OPIZ-EZ]. Or we also used [the acronym] OPIZ-SS, for Sierra Sur. When I joined at the age of fourteen, the task was to invite one other paisano, someone from the pueblo, in order to form a militant for a social organization. Because the needs we had were extreme poverty, complete abandonment, a marginalization, in which we lacked everything. Because what little we could harvest was collected by the coyotes, the fixers. Because the need to organize, to unite ourselves, was to find a market, a way to trade, to sell our products. That was our goal.*

*The most basic products have to be transported great distances from San Agustín to the rancherías, the farms, below. Maize could only be found in San Agustín. There was no road until [you got to] La Paz Obispo—even that was usually collapsing—so the only way was a lomo de bestia, riding a horse or burro. The Conasupo government store was the only store that was stocked. Carrying maize required several trips. The country does produce; but because of the transportations, the transfers, that’s where the time went.*

So for the Organization, the objective was to see where we could get those elemental services. Where are the chamacos, the kids, going to live? The only middle school was in San Agustín. They'd study, and then off to work, to subsist. Barefoot. And as it's so many people in this condition—are we always going to live like this? How many years will we live like this? Because our ancestors, did they not come out? Did they not fight? Or is it better to hoard whatever you can? Those in power didn't care if they saw people in that state. "Indios guarachudos," [sandal-wearing Indians], they called us. So we had to organize; take political power.

#### **Loxicha 1984. Not to make a war, but to defeat caciquismo, to defeat pistoleroismo**

*The movement started; it grew; it expanded. From the very beginning the idea was to use arms—not to make a war, or a revolution, but to defeat caciquismo, to defeat pistoleroismo. And the idea was not bring in people that murdered, or pistoleros, but people who were honest, responsible.*

*The estatutos, the principles [of the Organization]: Honestidad. Sencillez. Y disciplina [honesty, humility, discipline]. The basic, fundamental principles are that every member of the Organization has to be honest, loyal; that they can't be irresponsible, corrupt, liars, domineering. This must be a qualitative organization, not a quantitative one—of quality. Every militant that embraces this principle goes moving forward—it shows that they go forward, they're suitable. Punctuality was valued. The first thing was a process of politicization, to become a militant—there had to be discipline.*

It wasn't easily spoken about. Not in the cantina, not in public places—only with discipline. And every eight days fifteen cadres had to be assembled; representatives of the Organization would come. From the very beginning, the idea was to utilize nucleos, cuadros—taking a lesson from Lucio Cabañas; from Emiliano Zapata. One felt like a revolutionary.

#### **Loxicha 1984. The Organization was born: I never imagined that I would be one of the main actors**

*When he [Alberto Antonio] came to power, there started to be frictions. And, at the same*

*time, there arrived people from other organizations. But he was the visible head—he opened doors. “Alberto Antonio gives orders,” people would say; “he is the movement.” But I was close to him, and I would hear people say that—but he wasn’t the movement.*

*At one point, they [the leadership] said, “In order to clean up the image of the Organization, we’re going to move Alberto Antonio aside a little.” This was after the broncas (fights) with the caciques. Cause some people started saying that the Organization is killing people.*

*When the Organization was born, on July 29th [1984], there were a lot of people. They marched. There was a rally at a school. People were saying, “It’s the Communists... it’s the Zapatistas de Marx... ideas from Cuba....”*

*(There was a study done about how people lived in Cuba, in the USSR, and people were already saying—because they were saying, “we’re going to fight for a democratic country, without rich and poor.”)*

*Three or four days before the 29th of July, escuelitas and conferences were being held—professors, students, and academics were participating. But as a chamaco (kid) one didn’t even think about where those people came from. I never imagined that I would be one of the main actors. But because I already had that idea, since I was a chamaco, of down with the caciques, down with the powerful—well, I said, I want that. With that same idea as the héroes de la patria.*

Because [I had] a fifth grade teacher who would speak about Mexican history. He would say: “How Mexico suffers because of those imbalances: so much wealth, and so many millions in extreme poverty. The teacher’s name was Jerónimo Santiago Mejía, from Hidalgo or some other state. He used to say to me, “Mexico has every resource, all the materia prima. But those who hold the power, the rich countries that snatch what is ours, rob us—then they bring it back to use maquilado. The same as the Spanish robbed us—it’s the same story. Before, they used to sack us; now they just hand it over. That’s the history [or the story]; but one day, there will come one who will change it. One of you will be Zapata; will be Vicente Guerrero; La Corregidora—one of you will hold those ideals, will be part of history.” And I could see: here we have everything—lumber, coffee—but they take everything from us. They take us for a ride with money.<sup>169</sup> That needs to be abolished.

*That’s when this story [or history] is getting written. It wasn’t an easy struggle. It was delicate. And not easily would just anyone dare to join in.*

---

<sup>169</sup> *Nos jinetean el dinero.*

Alberto Antonio was the visible head, a co-founder. Many people held great respect for him. Others feared him. He was a very resolute character.

### **Loxicha 1986. To organize, indoctrinate, recruit**

*It was my job to organize people. To indoctrinate [educate]—call on them two or three times [and teach them about the principles of the Organization]—just like the gospel! It was an organization with ideals. It was a job that took many years.*

*I used to carry documents with me, which were all lost during the persecution. Those documents, if they still existed today, would explain—what is the Organization? What is it like? Who is it?*

*I've been in the struggle since I was fourteen, right as I finished primary school. The struggle was against abject poverty. Later, it was against the pistoleros and those who controlled politics. Children used to eat once a day. We wanted to bring the people in, even those who were skeptical [of what we were doing]. [We'd explain how] it wasn't a struggle against the pueblo; it would be against the power, against the government—but with everyone united.*

There certain merchants in Loxicha who abused and profited. We would invite them to hacer conciencia, to reflect: “It's alright to do business, pero no se lucran, no se abusan, but don't profit [from misery], don't be abusive.”<sup>170</sup> Because the merchant would give the campesino a loan, as advance payment on the coffee harvest, which was the profitable one. But if they didn't pay, they'd take away their terrenito, their little bit of land.

*I was one of ones who would go out to recruit, to talk to people. At first, I would go with my uncle, Silvano García Antonio. Sometimes we would have to go out at night. In those days, Don Beto used to take refuge in my house. It was Don Beto himself who first recruited me.*

*At that age [as a young adolescent, when I was recruited], I was giving basic literacy classes. I taught groups of six to eight people to read and write. [When I joined the Organization] they said, “You have a chalkboard. We have more [didactic] materials for you.” Later on, I was using two chalkboards, but it was no longer basic literacy, but politicization!*

*I had to leave many things buried in the ground [in order to hide them], out in the*

---

<sup>170</sup> *Está bien hacer negocio, pero no se lucran, no se abusan.*

*mountains, because no one lived around there. I even left canned foods buried there.*

I traversed all of the communities [around Loxicha in those days], recruiting people. Walking always at night.

### **Etla 2013. Prison: It's not like in the telenovelas (I had my freedom here)**

*Many compañeros died. My brothers. On February 8, 1998, they killed my brother. They raided my house fourteen times, every one of the police forces [took their turn].*

*[Why did I never request a transfer to Ixcotel Prison, to be with the other Loxicha prisoners?] Because I liked it here. [When I got here] I was still a revolutionary—and in here it's also pueblo. I decided to get to work. I had my freedom here.*

*Cuando caí, when I was captured, I imagined that prison was like the municipal jail. Where was I going to sleep? Who was going to feed me? People would say that [in prison] you had to sleep standing. But it's not like in the telenovelas. When I arrived, they put me in an observation cell for a few days. When I got out of there, I saw, what is there to be afraid of? They even gave me a torta (sandwich) and a refresco (soda). All that fear of going to prison, based on bad information, when, in reality, it's not so terrible.*

In Ixcotel [where the other six Loxicha prisoners are], there was a “cacique” who controlled the carpentry shop; now he's here [in Etla]. He used to occupy two spots in the shop, and he overcharged [the other prisoners in the shop] for everything, because he was in charge of sales [inside the prison]. Now I buy from him here.

### **Etla 1999. Carpentry**

*[Before carpentry] I first started making handbags [made of woven plastic yarn, a common craft among prisoners in Etla and Ixcotel]. This was in the days of the plantón [the women's protest camp in the Zócalo]. My wife was staying at the plantón, so I told her, “go sell these.”*

*“What if they don't sell?”*

*“You just try going up to any gringo around there.” And they did sell. She even learned to speak some English, and she would write the price down there. My wife would fill two taxis with*

*bags. Later, I paired up with another vendor—we had to keep struggling. But then they lifted the [women’s] plantón, after the Amnesty Law [in 2001]. And I thought, “I’m not leaving, so I have to find other work.” I finished with the bags, and I started getting the tools [for carpentry]; slowly, I built up my tallercito, my little workshop.*

*The plantón is leaving [so we wouldn’t be able to sell there any longer]. I began making coat racks, and I said to my wife, “you’ll have to go door-to-door selling these. And I’m going to make furniture.” Although I still didn’t know how. In order to sell, you have to have colmillo, savvy. But my wife got the word out so much that clients started seeking me out.*

*At a later stage, I was also making santitos (wooden representations of Catholic saints). You need a lot of creativity for that. My wife traveled to all the pueblos around here [in the Central Valleys] selling them—Etna, El Tule, Zaachila, everywhere.*

*The coat racks would sell a lot—they still do. One time a hotel bought up all of them. Then I moved to furniture. My wife would go to the furniture stores; they’d say they would come [to buy pieces], but then they wouldn’t. “Well keep looking,” I would tell her, “one of them will come”—even in spite of the fear of coming to a prison!*

*One buyer started asking for unvarnished pieces, which are cheaper; which they would varnish themselves later. These days, an unvarnished dresser costs \$1,200, or \$1,400 varnished.*

### **Etna 2013. Zacarías**

On the day of our first interview, Zacarías is dressed in sports (track) pants, a polo-style shirt, a baseball cap, tennis shoes, and a watch. He keeps a small pencil tucked under his cap, close to his ear, which he reaches for to write notes on scraps of wood or paper, and then tucks it under his cap again. He plays guitar in a rondalla, a musical ensemble, here in Etna. He tells me he likes the song “Día de un borracho.”

Zacarías says there used to be fewer than 100 inmates in Etna Prison. But, currently, there are 260 prisoners, across three dormitories (A, B, and C), and it is severely overcrowded and over capacity. There are fourteen carpenters in Etna Prison. Two of them, besides Zacarías, “work well,” he says. He employs six workers in the shop. All in all, close to forty people work in some capacity in the workshop. He sells, on average, eight pieces of furniture each week.

### **Loxicha 1996. The silly side of persecutions**

*I once recorded a testimony about el lado chusco de las persecuciones—the silly side of the persecutions—and how, at the slightest noise, we'd bolt off running:*

*One time, I was out with eight compañeros, and we were staying overnight in a cafetal, a coffee orchard, near a farmhouse. It started to rain, so we went inside the house. Then one of us noticed the light of a lamp shining down below by the river. The lamplight was reflecting on the river and with the rain on the wet cafetales, it looked as though they were hundreds of lights. We thought it was the judiciales, the Judicial Police, out on an operation—so we bolted out of the house and ran up into the mountains! It wasn't until the next day that we found out that it had just been the chavo (boy) of the family that lived in that house, who remembered that he'd left a cow tied up down there while he was searching for something by the river. When he was coming back up, he noticed a bunch of lumps running up the monte, so he thought "it must be some neighbors who got caught by nightfall." He got to the house and he saw that not even his family was home—they'd all peeled off [with us] after grabbing blankets and a few things—so he ran off to the monte too!*

*Such was the fear amongst families [in Loxicha during the persecutions], that even shadows could frighten them. It was because of the persecution, the harassment, the physical and psychological torture, the fear of being assassinated, disappeared, imprisoned, the women raped.*

## **Oaxaca 1996. Fiesta in Huatulco**

*Right as I was about to get together with my wife is when the struggle became most serious, and I had to take on a more active role at that point. There was no fiesta, no celebration, all we had was a week living together in my mother's house [in San Vicente Yogondoy]. One week, and they told me I had to get back to Oaxaca—because I was in charge of people there too—so we rented a room in Colonia Estrella [on the outskirts of Oaxaca City], and we lived together.*

*We lived there with my brother-in-law. He had finished studying in San Agustín and came to Oaxaca to study middle school (secundaria).*

*In 1996, my brother-in-law helped me with in the [political] activities, preparing things—because Huatulco was going to have its main fiesta. "There's going to be a fiesta, a celebration," people were saying. And we needed the support of a lot of people. So he collaborated, he participated with me—but he never knew a thing, never asked, "what's this whole show about?" He never asked, "Zacarías, what's all that money for? Or those things?"*

*My wife was pregnant at that time, and it was right around those dates that my chamaco was born—the 25th of August, 1996—[just three days before the "fiesta principal de Huatulco"].*

Many things happened at the same time for me—political [clandestine], family, democratic [organizing]. I was never at home, I was in the preparations. She would be at home. When I returned [before the birth], she was in pain. I took her in a taxi to the hospital. I left her at eleven in the morning, then I had to get back to the preparations—the "breads" for the fiesta in Huatulco. And attending to people, with the

preparations for the fiesta—many people. It wasn't until night time [...].

## **Conclusion**

This chapter examined the testimonies of former Loxicha prisoners and erstwhile OPIZ militants from San Agustín Loxicha serving long-term prison sentences: Abraham García Ramírez and Zacarías García López. My purpose is to give the reader an inside view of the lives of indigenous political prisoners in Oaxaca, and of what it means to grow up in a peasant community experiencing rapid political and economic change, to become immersed in radical grassroots politics—at the margins of, and in opposition to the state—and to then undergo prolonged incarceration for it. Abraham and Zacarías' voices convey the humanity and complexity of the extraordinarily difficult lives lived by these two men, as well as the poignancy of their hopefulness and desire for life. Interwoven in the twin narratives of the two prisoners, the argument of this chapter, is that the prisoners' voices reveal a void, in living contours and spectral shadows, that was left by a failed revolution and the silent reassertion of violent oppression in its wake.

These voices reveal and articulate silent trajectories of grassroots resistance, as well as grassroots violence, in a dialogue rendered across two prisons, mediated by the feet and the notebook of the anthropologist. As oral histories these voices are themselves traces of the past. They are the expressions of subjects at once radical and shrewd, and traumatized and marooned; they are also expressions of deeply rooted Zapotec values and ways of telling a story or interpreting the world—reflections of the multiple shifting “calendars and geographies” of prisons and mountains. They are expressions (political, artistic, traditional) of living memory, and the only traces of this history of violence capable of articulating and outlining the void left by a failed revolutionary project and a silencing reassertion of violence in its wake.



Through testimony, they repurpose it as something generative.<sup>171</sup>

In narrating pieces of the histories of the OPIZ and the EPR, the prisoners' oral histories illustrate the overlapping political, ideological, and organizational differences between these organizations. In contrast to the urban guerrillas such as the EPR that originated in the sixties and seventies, the OPIZ began as a rural and indigenous movement. The testimonies above reflect a moral philosophy of rural indigenous communities, as in the three word statute of "honesty, humility, discipline."

The importance of alternative forms of memory, including testimony, is that they do not necessarily conform to the logic of historical time, since memory itself can index plural and contending temporalities and non-human agents.<sup>172</sup> Testimony is, of course, only one of many alternative forms of memory, and it does not necessarily depart from the logic of secular history. Yet it is an open and versatile vehicle for memory, as it is essentially available to anyone with the capacity to speak and its content is as variable as are the myriad nexus of speech and memory.

The project of *Subaltern Studies* is a helpful reference here, as it was fundamentally concerned with demonstrating that peasants in colonial India were the makers of their own history. Guha's work, in particular, drew strength from its critique of Eric Hobsbawm's depiction of peasant rebels as a "pre-political people who have not yet found, or only begun to find, a specific language in which to express themselves."<sup>173</sup> Guha argued instead that peasant insurgency in colonial India was a thoroughly political

---

<sup>171</sup> See Ruth Behar, "Rage and Redemption: Reading the Life Story of a Mexican Marketing Woman," in *The Dialogic Emergence of Culture*, ed. Dennis Tedlock and Bruce Mannheim (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 223–58. Also Ruth Behar, *Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza's Story* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003). Behar's seminal work life history of Esperanza Hernández, a Mexican market woman and her comadre, examines the complex layers of connection among lived experiences of violence and trauma, and the acts storytelling, story-listening, and writing.

<sup>172</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), 16, 96.

<sup>173</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1965), 4.

struggle. As Chakrabarty points out, Guha's claim implied that not only were peasants a "real contemporary" of modernity in colonial India, but that so too were the ghostly or divine entities that animated their struggles. The problem of conceptualizing peasant politics in modern India for Guha is thus not that peasants were outside of politics or modernity, but rather that political modernity brings together (at least) two incommensurable logics: that of secular rationalism introduced by European colonialism, and another logic, which is not secular and in which gods, ghosts, and spirits have political agency.<sup>174</sup> Thus, in Guha's analysis, peasants did not lack political consciousness—European social science was simply incapable of recognizing the plural logics of peasant politics. Or, to invert Hobsbawm's statement, it was historicist Europeans who had not yet found, or only begun to find, an adequate language through which to account for peasant politics.

Whether an adequate language can be found becomes a moot point, however. Chakrabarty maintains that the task of historicizing peasant insurgency and, more broadly, the actions of people whose logic is foreign to secular historicism, presents significant methodological challenges, if not insurmountable contradictions. Here the inversion of Hobsbawm's statement is relevant since for Chakrabarty these contradictions are largely a problem of translation: how can the historian translate the life-worlds of peasants, whose politics and temporalities were not those of secular historicism, into a language that is proscribed by the "secular, empty, and homogenous time of history"?<sup>175</sup> The short answer to this question, claims Chakrabarty, is that transparency in translation is impossible, and to assume otherwise constitutes an act of naivety at best, an act of violence at worst. Thus, while the historian cannot avoid writing in the "master code" of secular history, the task of subaltern histories should be to let the incommensurables of other life-worlds within those histories reveal the finitude of the code of history. That is, to write "histories"

---

<sup>174</sup> Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 11-16.

<sup>175</sup> "In the famous words of Walter Benjamin..." Ibid, 23.

that in some sense provincialize the imperious code of history, “to take history, the code, to its limits in order to make its unworking visible.”<sup>176</sup>

The ultimate unworking of history is not an option, for we cannot give up Marx or the legacy of European thought, writes Chakrabarty; yet the limits of history must be made discernible in the histories we write, for we cannot give up “difference.” And one way in which the historian can attempt to infuse difference into the homogenizing code of history—real capital into abstract capital, the poetry of the dead into Marx—is to hold “history” next to other forms of memory.<sup>177</sup>

-\*-

---

<sup>176</sup> Ibid, 17, 88-90, 96.

<sup>177</sup> This way, “they can help in the interrogation of each other, to work out the ways these immiscible forms of recalling the past are juxtaposed in our negotiations of modern institutions, to question the narrative strategies in academic history that allow its secular temporality the appearance of successfully assimilating to itself memories that are strictly speaking unassimilable.” Ibid, 93-94.

## Chapter 6. On Being Disappeared

### *Los heraldos negros    The Black Heralds*

*Hay golpes en la vida, tan fuertes... Yo no sé!  
Golpes como el odio de Dios; como si ante ellos,  
la resaca de todo lo sufrido  
se empozara en el alma... Yo no sé!*    *There are blows in life so hard... I don't know!  
Blows like the hatred of God; as if before them,  
the dregs of everything ever suffered  
stagnates in the soul... I don't know!*

*Son pocos, pero son... Abren zanjas oscuras  
en el rostro más fiero y en el lomo más fuerte.  
Serán tal vez los potros de bárbaros atilas;  
o heraldos negros que nos manda la Muerte.*    *They are few, but they are... They open dark furrows  
upon the fiercest face and on the strongest back.  
Perhaps they are the stallions of cruel Attilas;  
or black heralds sent to us by Death.*

*Son las caídas hondas de los Cristos del alma,  
de alguna fe adorable que el Destino blasfema.  
Esos golpes sangrientos son las crepitaciones  
de algún pan que en la puerta del horno se nos quema.*    *They are the deep falls of the Christs of the soul,  
from some lovable faith desecrated by Fate.  
Those savage blows are the crackling  
of our bread in the oven door burning,*

*Y el hombre... Pobre... pobre! Vuelve los ojos, como  
cuando por sobre el hombro nos llama una palmada;  
vuelve los ojos locos, y todo lo vivido  
se empoza, como una charco de culpa, en la mirada.*    *And man... Poor... poor man! He casts his eyes back, like  
when a pat upon our shoulder beckons us;  
turns his maddened eyes, and everything lived through  
stagnates, like a pool of guilt, in his gaze.*

*Hay golpes en la vida, tan fuertes... Yo no sé!*    *There are blows in life so hard... I don't know!*

- César Vallejo (1918)<sup>178</sup>

---

<sup>178</sup> My translation.

This chapter is about the narrating of violence, the affective half-life of torture, and the embodied poetics of testimony. It reflects on and takes the form of a fragmented life story—that of a Mexican rickshaw driver haunted by traumatic memories of being abducted and tortured by the Mexican military for alleged clandestine activities as an indigenous guerrilla in the 1990s. Aureliano’s testimony reveals viscerally saturated memories of what it was like to be forcibly “disappeared” (*desaparecido/a*) and routinely tortured. His words and stories also reveal what it means to live, in the present, with the traumatic imprints of a none too distant violent past. After being “re-appeared” through a state-of-exceptional sleight of legal hand, there came time in state prison, a hunger strike, federal prison; eventually, liberation. Yet, even in freedom, the prison has not left him entirely. A scent of deodorant, the taste of food, certain songs, or combinations of words are all part of a constant barrage of reminders and triggers that meld past and present. Testimony emerges here as more than a historical text or an expression of memory or ideology. Giving testimony reenacts the destruction of the world and language that is involved in torture and giving (testimonial) forced confession—yet it enacts a simultaneous reconstruction of world and language, as voice attempts to subsume and channel the droning of violence.

This chapter reflects on and takes the form of a fractured life story. In this chapter I explore ways of reading, or listening to, the life history narrative of a Oaxacan *mototaxi* (rickshaw) driver: “Aureliano,” a former peasant activist and political prisoner who lives haunted by traumatic memories of being *desaparecido*—forcibly “disappeared,” by the Mexican state: In 1997 he was abducted (illegally) by police and sent to a secret military prison for nine months, where he was routinely tortured and interrogated. This chapter is partly about what it means to live with trauma and the half-life of torture. It is also about the narration—or narrativizing, that is, the process by which experience (or theory) is presented in the form of a story or a narrative—of violence and self and the embodied poetics of testimony.

Aureliano’s testimony is charged with viscerally saturated memories of what it means to have been

”disappeared,” and to bear the marks of torture and prison on one’s body and consciousness. His words and stories reveal what it means to live, in the present, with the traumatic imprints of a none too distant violent past. After being “re-appeared” through a state-of-exceptional sleight of legal hand, Aureliano was sent to a state prison on the coast of Oaxaca. Yet after organizing a hunger strike, he was transferred to the federal maximum-security prison at Almoloya, “a gray hell” that preceded his actual liberation. Yet, even in freedom, the prison never left him. As his narrative shows, he is nearly crippled at times by constant reminders and resurgences of the past: The taste of burned coffee, the scent of some deodorants, certain *ranchera* songs, and particular combinations of words are all part of a daily barrage of traces and triggers that meld past and present. Testimony emerges here as more than a historical text or an expression of memory or ideology. The act of giving testimony reenacts the destruction of the world and language that is involved in torture and giving (testimonial) forced confession—yet it enacts a simultaneous reconstruction of world and language, as voice attempts to subsume and channel the droning of violence.

Aureliano claims to have lived many lives, and died a few, and the act of narrating his “life history” is partly an act of reassembling those past lives. However, the dark gravitational center of Aureliano’s life story, in his own retelling of it, is the time that he spent disappeared. Thus, it is his testimony as a former *desaparecido* that I will particularly focus on here. Listening to or reading Aureliano’s testimony reveals disturbingly intimate visions—as well as sounds, smells, tastes, and other sensory perceptions—of a world turned on its head. This chapter is about the lingering experiences of torture and ways of narrating it. On one hand, it reveals something of a phenomenology of disappearance and torture, as well as about senses and longings for freedom under the pall of prolonged isolation and torture. And it is about the traces of that violence—in the embodied memories that become storied and narrated in testimony. It serves as a zoom lens onto something that was meant to remain hidden and silent. On the other hand, it also provides a sense of what it means to live with the long-term effects of this violence.

"I was *disappeared* on July 20, 1997." Walking in the streets of Oaxaca City that day, Aureliano was levantado (picked up) by police, who delivered him to the military. They kept him blindfolded and tied up in a warehouse for nine days, where they tortured him to the point of almost killing him. They disfigured his face with their boots, they broke his nose and a rib. Torture sessions would go on for eight or ten hours each day. For nine days he didn't eat, wasn't allowed to sleep. At all times they kept loud music blaring, and all the while the questions never stopped.

"What is your rank (inside the organization)? When did you join? Tell us about your father. Tell us about your brothers." The questioning is formulaic. Even in his telling, despite the anxiety it generates to remember the torture, the questions are mentioned in passing, a given, like part of a ritual. As Elaine Scarry and other scholars have noted, interrogation is crucial to the act of torture—but its primary purpose is not the collection of information: The act of interrogation, according to Scarry, does not exist "outside an episode of torture as its motive or justification: it is internal to the structure of torture." "Intense pain is world-destroying"—thus, as the pain of torture increases and becomes overwhelming, the prisoner's world is destroyed (or, at least, diminished), whilst the questions of the torturer affirm and solidify the world of the torturer and the regime.<sup>179</sup>

After nine days, he could hear birds and the voice of a man selling fruit outside the warehouse. They untied him and took the blindfold off, so that they could take pictures of him—presumably, in case they needed to prove that he was alive. "When they untied my hands, I could not move my arms anymore. They

---

<sup>179</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 28–29, 35–36.

were like two branches. I could not open my eyes due to the swelling in my face, the filth in my eyes.” Later that day they placed him in a van and then in an airplane. It was his first time in an airplane. He never found out where exactly this airplane took him—but it delivered him to the place where he would spend the next nine months—a clandestine prison, most likely inside a military facility near Mexico City.

Aureliano’s disappearance floats like a dense black hole in Aureliano’s life story, its negative center. I call this a life story rather than life history to emphasize the fictions of self-representation. However, this does not put into question the truth of torture. Testimony is a literary genre—yet it can also be the fundamental piece of evidence of torture. Details may vary, but the victim knows that he was tortured and disappeared.

Forced disappearances generate archives only indirectly. There are no official records of it, and the judicial archive occludes it, presenting an altered version of events: an arrest date in 1998, nine months after Aureliano’s abduction, when his military interrogators placed him back under the purview of the judicial and penal systems—back on the books and back into the archive. His entry into the archive is the moment of his re-appearance—but obliquely, through documents that reinforce the deafening silence of disappearance by presenting an incompatible chain of events. Thus, the only “archive” of disappearance and torture, its material trace or index, is the body of the victim and its (embodied) memories. Trauma and embodied memories turn out to be a kind of shadow archive to the official archive.

Desaparecido/a is a familiar term for many Latin Americans and Latin Americanists. Yet its conjugation often strikes those unfamiliar with this term as bizarre: “to be disappeared;” it is not generally used in English as a transitive verb or a nominalized adjective. What does it mean to disappear someone? Or



be disappeared?<sup>180</sup> It is a semantically and politically complicated term. It was recently codified into Mexico law as a distinct crime (although, ironically, no one has been charged with it in the Ayotzinapa case). To be disappeared is to be abducted or killed—by agents of the state, in their capacity as such—but off the books.

Desaparecidos (or desaparecidas) are often presumed to be simply dead. This is part of the term's political and metaphysical complexity. Insisting that the disappeared are not dead is central to the demands of political organizations of family members of the disappeared: not until they are present can they be alive or dead. Across Latin America, such organizations and the solidarity movements around them have traditionally been comprised and led primarily by women.

Rarely do the disappeared re-appear. Aureliano's story cannot be taken as representative of other cases of forced disappearance elsewhere. However, Aureliano's experience conforms to a pattern established in the 1970s in Mexico, during the dirty war led by the ruling PRI party against the revolutionary left. His experience bears striking resemblance to other cases around the same time, such as that of Tzompaxtle——, an EPR guerrilla or Eperrista from a Nahuatl community in Guerrero state, who was also disappeared by the military the same year as Aureliano, and who escaped his captors.

These practices became paradigmatic of many Latin American states' repertoires of counterinsurgency during the Cold War, yet in Mexico they have persisted into the current century. In countries such as Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, or Chile the question of forced disappearances is still at the center over debates over historical memory, truth, and justice. Yet in Mexico, the issue of desaparecidos and historical memory has been subsumed by the ongoing relevance and occurrence of this phenomenon. In the context of the drug war, techniques of terror developed by the state are now also used by narco-trafficking gangs. And the state has continued to use forced disappearances and incarceration in its approach to

---

<sup>180</sup> Forced disappearances have taken various forms: examples range the victims of military dictatorships, to the case of 43 students from Ayotzinapa, Guerrero, under a narco-state in Mexico.

perceived threats, including guerrilla organizations as well as non-violent forms of social protest [More on this later. . . It is important to note the distinctions, as well as the overlap, between the terms *desaparición* and *desaparición forzada*, because the latter refers to disappearance by state elements. Today there is ample debate about a “crisis” of *desaparecidos* due to the drug war, where estimates range between thirty and seventy thousand disappeared since 2006.<sup>181</sup>

### **The time that wasn't**

The epicenter of Aureliano's life story, in his own retellings of it, is *the time that I was disappeared*. The event and memory of his forced disappearance exert a powerful, at times overwhelming, gravitational force upon the rest of his life (and upon the lives of others around him, such as his family)—both in his telling of it and in his everyday existence. Its memory generates both chaos and disorder, yet also a perverse stability. At times, this event-memory resembles a black hole. Nothing around it appears to escape its disturbing influence. Its center is so dense as to be practically invisible; no light escapes it; it reveals itself through its influence on the movement of things around it. At other times, this gravity and its blinding darkness, appear to recede. There are better days. He says there are days he can't leave his house, can hardly move. Other days, he's moving, interacting with people, facing the world and its hidden menaces. There is a constant emphasis on movement, which is heavily associated with freedom in his narratives about prison and disappearance, understandably. Immobility, in his stories and his analysis, is associated with confinement, torture, and death.

Aureliano's words reveal the effects and affects of prolonged isolation and torture, as well as those

---

<sup>181</sup> On the prevalence of forced disappearance, torture, human rights abuses, and impunity; disappearance and torture as state practices, and situates their origins in the dirty war, see Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), “The Human Rights Situation in Mexico,” 2016, <https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/reports/pdfs/Mexico2016-en.pdf>.

of liberation. Methodologically, his testimony forms a powerful zoom lens into a place that was meant to remain hidden. It is not to make a pornography of violence. As Elaine Scarry notes, torture consists of “a primary physical act, the infliction of pain, and a primary verbal act, the interrogation.” It is not only the intense pain in torture that “destroys a person’s self and world, a destruction experienced spatially as either the contraction of the universe down to the immediate vicinity of the body or as the body swelling to fill the entire universe. [Yet] Intense pain is also language-destroying.” To confess under torture “is a way of saying, yes, all is almost gone now, there is almost nothing left now, even this voice, the sounds I am making, no longer form my words but the words of another” (35). On the other hand, “acts that restore the voice become not only a denunciation of the pain but almost a diminution of the pain, a partial reversal of the process of torture itself.” It is in this spirit that these oral histories are shared. Testimony is not some perfectly transparent window to a petrified past. Rather, it says as much about the present as it does about the past, which is not dead, but living in the present, shedding and accreting meanings.

### **Embodied memory, eviscerated testimony**

Testimony is, above all, a form of embodied memory. The act of giving testimony, of narrating the presence of the past, makes memory embodied and material. In recounting episodes of violence, such as torture and its integral element, the forced confession, testimony. In contrast with the written testimonies in chapter 1, the oral testimonies in this chapter reveal this much more fully.

### **Silences**

## Pasts present, alternating between 1997 and 1986

The following italicized passages are direct quotes from Aureliano's testimony.

*I was disappeared in Oaxaca, on July 20, 1997. For nine days, they tortured me, for eight to ten hours, every day . . . They had 'collaborators' (entregadores) there from the town, and they would whisper in my ear, "I know you from school." They kicked me so many times that they disfigured my face, they broke my nose and one of my ribs. For nine days, I didn't sleep, didn't eat. They would play loud music, all day, and ask questions—"tell us about your father... your brothers... what is your rank?... when did you join?" But mostly they asked about my father. Still, for the first twenty-four hours, they weren't able to make me say a single word. After that, I told them who I was. But not what I did. It made them angry that I could be silent for so long.*

\*

*I remember when we had to leave the pueblo (San Agustín Loxicha, in 1986), after the repression by the caciques. It was after the events at El Obispo, for which they blamed my father. It was a Sunday, and we were all at home, my mother, my brothers were there, when we heard on the loudspeaker that the municipal authorities had been killed (except for Aureliano's father, who was the municipal president at the time, and another man close to him). But my father wasn't in Loxicha anymore, he had already left, and what were we supposed to do? What happened? Why? Who did it? Who knows. But immediately, all eyes were upon our house, and we were there, but we weren't responsible for that.*

\*

*After nine days, one morning I could hear birds outside and a man selling fruit. They untied me and took the blindfold off, so they could take pictures of me as proof that I was alive. When they untied my hands, I couldn't move my arms anymore, they were like two branches. And I couldn't open my eyes due to the swelling in my face, the filth in my eyes. That day, they threw me in the back of a VW van, like a sack of beans, tied up and blindfolded, with a bag over my head. Federico was there too; I knew it was him because I heard them asking him questions. They had us face-down in the back and they threw a mattress on top of us. Our foreheads were touching, and, in spite of the pain I felt, I said, "Federico, don't worry, everything's going to be alright," but Federico didn't answer. (Years later, when I ran into Federico, I asked him if he remembered when I said to him that everything would be alright. Yes, he remembered.) They then boarded us onto a small airplane and took us to another place, probably Mexico City, although I never knew for certain. That's where they kept me for nine months.*

*The worst part is the psychological torture, not so much the physical. Of physical torture, they did everything to me: tehuacanazos [mineral water sprayed up one's nostrils], buckets of water and electrical shocks when I was naked, beatings, days without eating, nights without sleeping, because they would make me stay standing. They would let me go*

*to the bathroom only when they wanted. I never slept well at night because it was impossible to rest with my hand handcuffed to the bed. Worse than any of the physical pain, the worst torture was hearing the screams of someone being tortured in another room. It was terrifying, because there was nothing you could do except wait for them to come for you. The other worst thing was the music, at full volume, which they would never turn down. In order to not go crazy, I had to learn all of Chente's [Vicente Fernández] songs.*

\*

*That afternoon, I went to the rancho [in La Conchuda, a nearby village]. My brothers went, my mother stayed, my grandmother stayed, my little brothers stayed. It was about nine days later, on the novenario, when they went to destroy [our house]. My mother was still there that morning, and my uncle. The pistoleros [gunmen] came shouting insults and shooting into the house. Finally then they realized that it was really serious and they had to leave. But it was such a terrible course. It was a hell. . . We had to leave because it was clear that they were going to finish all of us, whoever they found, if it was grandparents, uncles, cousins, everyone.*

\*

*I would never turn to look at my captors. I had a blindfold, which I could take off when they were not there, but as soon as I heard a sound, I would put it back on. It's crucial never to look at them. If you see their faces, they will never let you go free. So I would only take it off like that. But I could still always see if I looked down. And during that time, when I was disappeared, I learned how to look out. When you lose a sense, you develop others, so I learned to imagine the things I couldn't see—and I learned to see them exactly as they were. I could see the men who were torturing me and, later, when I saw them with my eyes, they were exactly as I had seen them in my mind. I could see many things.*

*The boredom would become intolerable—there was nothing to do. So one day I started playing with the ants. The guards would bring me tortilla with my food, and one time I was tearing the tortilla and dropping crumbs on the floor, and I noticed after a while that these tiny black ants started coming for the crumbs, forming a long line across the floor and up the wall. Yes, there was a very tiny hole where the wall met the roof, through which they came in and out. Though some of the ants would play dumb, (se hacían pendejas!) Haha! Not all of them would come all the way down for the food, they would just come in and walk around the hole a little and then go back out—out of laziness! When a guard noticed that I was throwing pieces of tortilla on the floor, he asked me, "Aren't you hungry?" I only answered, no, not very. But after a few days they realized what I was doing and they stopped bringing me tortilla, and the ants stopped coming.*

\*

*I remember our house, destroyed; sixty years of history that my grandfather had built. The milpa [corn field], burned, everything destroyed. We abandoned everything. I*

*remember seeing the animals that we had to abandon when we escaped. Donkeys, dogs, animals that one is fond of. I saw all that, and I didn't want to leave it. I knew that we wouldn't come back after a few months. And I couldn't believe that my grandparents would never be able to go back to the pueblo. That year—it was the year that I started living with my wife—I had a hectare, a “medida” we call it there, of milpa. It was the first year that I planted my own. And I had a bull—a beautiful black bull!—which I had bought with all I had. Because I love the rancho, the country, growing things, having animals. It was my dream, living there, being there. But then this abandonment. My grandfather had several medidas of milpa, four or five, it was a lot. I had one, but it was my first year and the corn was beautiful (chulo). When it dried, they burned it, everything burned. They stole the animals, our few possessions.*

\*

*There was a window covered with newspaper in the room where they kept me, and I would read it. It was from La Jornada. I read everything on the page again and again, although it was always the same story. I knew it backwards and forwards, but I would still read it over again. Anything to keep myself distracted. I would count the tiles on the floor, I would count the days with them, I would imagine different shapes, but then they would change on me and everything would get lost. Either way, I knew how long I had been there, the weeks, the months. They would ask me if I knew how long I had been in there, and I would say no. But I knew. When it had been around six or seven months, they asked me, “do you know how long you've been here?” I don't know, I said, two months? But I knew.*

*In order to survive there, you had to be strong and not let hope die. So the body would suffer, but not my mind. When they would begin beating me, I would go away. My body stayed there, but my mind was gone. My mind was somewhere else, perhaps I was in Mexico City, or I was in Oaxaca, or back at the rancho. I would be there, with the moon and the sun and the animals, and I was happy. At first, it was easy. But after six or seven months, I began to break. I couldn't leave my body anymore, the world outside was too far away. . .*

\*

*I remember looking at La Conchuda [where the rancho was] from a hillside and feeling such rage. That's why I entered. If not, who else was going to do it? My father was wanted, he couldn't move. My brothers? No. And it was very hard, it meant doing it alone. Though sometimes there were three, sometimes five of us. We would walk for days. Three days straight. Nights without sleeping. Nights sleeping beneath the rain. It was hard, and it hardened me:*

## **Testimony and antropoesía**

In a recent essay, Renato Rosaldo makes a case for *antropoesía* or “poetry that situates itself in a social and cultural world; poetry that is centrally about the human condition.” Poetic exploration resembles ethnographic inquiry, he claims, in the centrality of description to each and the need for insights to emerge from specifics rather than generalizations. He employs this sort of hybrid verse-with-an-ethnographic-sensibility in order to re-examine a traumatic event from his own past. The work of *antropoesía*, he explains, “is to bring its subject—whether pain, sorrow, shock, or joy—home to the reader. It is not an ornament; it does not make things pretty. Nor does it shy away from agony and distress. Instead it brings things closer, or into focus, or makes them palpable. It slows the action, the course of events, to reveal depth of feeling and to explore its character. It is a place to dwell and savor more than a space for quick assessment.”<sup>182</sup>

I would perhaps argue that poetry also has a special role, where torture destroys discourse, poetry fills gaps, not necessarily in Rosaldo’s sense, but in the poetics of testimony itself, like scar tissue in the interstices of silence, pain, noise.

*When they were going to (re-)appear me, just a few days before, inside that room...*

*My life withered.*

*The entire world is on its head.*

*Every day, life goes on withering.*

*It’s keeping your eyes fixed on a point that you cannot find.*

*Like a wheel of fortune, it goes up and down and never ends.*

*Sometimes it seems it would be better to die.*

*Like an invalid, I have my legs and my arms, but I can’t use them.*

*I think sometimes it’s better to die.*

*They killed S. not long ago. He was the last of my old compañeros (who had not been assassinated).*

*Nothing is left of what we created.*

*We were an army. An organization.*

*It’s all gone. Or, if it exists, it’s broken, in pieces.*

---

<sup>182</sup> Renato Rosaldo, *The Day of Shelly’s Death: The Poetry and Ethnography of Grief* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 105.

*They're all dead now.  
That which we took to be our hope no longer exists.*

*There is a barrier that I encounter every day.  
Torture comes, and it crushes. Turns humans into less.  
Every evening, life fades.  
It goes on withering.  
Like that tree, you have to care for it, give it water and fertilizer.  
Or else it withers.*

*It's like I'm walking, but I'm carrying an enormous load.  
A load—like this!  
How do you let it go?*

*Understanding why is moving forward.  
Seeking culprits is going back.  
The culprit is this life we lead of poverty and marginality.  
They use us like beasts of burden.  
Before, people were tied to the land estates (latifundios).  
Yes, some things have gotten better due to the struggles there have been.  
Now there are government programs in Loxicha.  
Loxicha is on the internet, it's in the media.  
There have been changes; not all was in vain.*

### **Contraction of space and dilation of time**

Three prisons—two formal prisons, Pochutla and Almoloya, and the clandestine cell and a nine-month period that make up “the disappearance.” Notably, Aureliano’s narrative and descriptions of his disappearance are completely bereft of place names. At times, during the interviews, in formulating a statement about this period, he occasionally seems to come to a point where he needs and seeks a place-name, some sort of toponym or place-word. Every time, he reaches and stops, doesn’t use substitutes or placeholders, but rather reverts instead to a stock phrase such as “when I was disappeared” or “while they had me disappeared,” in place of a place name.

This is, in part, reflective of the uncertainty of where he was, that is, where the cell was, though he



presumes that it was in Mexico City, in the underground of a military complex.<sup>183</sup> Yet the linguistic evidence points to something more complicated than simply not knowing the exact location: This was a non-place, it was nowhere, it was the physical reality of “disappearance”, a state of near obliteration. For those looking for him on the outside, his family and comrades—as with the case of all victims of forced disappearance—he, the disappeared, could be anywhere. Aureliano was neither here (in life) nor there (in death), nowhere in particular, nowhere known—thus, simply, nowhere.

Aureliano often speaks of knowing and feeling his proximity to death, and of a distance from the known places of his past that could only be bridged internally, through the imagination and a negation of the body, further overcoming the hold of space and body on his tortured self. A torture chamber, where victims are kept disappeared are indeed non-places, or places where persons are unmade.

Spatially, his words reflect the extreme diminution of space. Only during his description of his disappearance, when he speaks of the cell (its walls, corners, and patterns on the floor) and of the constraints on his body, do his words convey a strong sense of space. The spatial scale of his words becomes microscopic. Yet it is not a place, it has no name, and its physical reality seems as though it were floating in space or deep under the sea—completely detached from society, from people other than his captors and other torture victims, whose presence he perceived only by their screams.

As time moves forward in his recounting, it seems to thicken and stagnate in a viscous pool surrounding the present moment in every direction, boundless. At the same time, space and the connectedness of his body to known places and the past becomes progressively thinner, in his own words, as he nears the final demolishing admission that, after nine months, or seven, he could no longer manage to leave his body any longer, to travel far away to the rancho or the sun, as he had been able to do earlier on to

---

<sup>183</sup> Other testimonies and investigations of similar cases also point to the likelihood of this. See John Gibler, *Tzompaxtle: la fuga de un guerrillero* (Mexico, D.F.: Tusquets Editores, 2014); Ulloa Bormemann, *Sendero en tinieblas*.

escape the pain of the body. Finally, all other space disappears and he is fully condemned to the four walls and the ultimate cell, his own consciousness and body, in a terrible triumph for his torturers. The bounds of time burst, with life and death each as inaccessible as the other. An obliteration of space and boundless explosion of time.

It's all a theater, of course. The world is there. In the end, he returns to it, though the imprint of death is everywhere. [A harrowing sort of initiation? Anonymous figures abduct a candidate, provoking dissolution of their self—although in such rites, the individual is reconstituted and reintegrated according to that society's framework for being in the world...? Here there seems to be no reintegration of the subject. Perhaps their functionalist role of prison and torture is to produce unhealthy, unproductive subjects, crippled and separated from their own sense of agency...]

On the other hand, in tandem with the contraction of external space, at least in the early period in which he is able to do so, he creates an intricate inner world, woven out of imagination, memory, silence, pain, and reproduced powerfully in his words of testimony:

### **A gray hell**

*2000. For instance, I would tell you the situation inside the prisons. In the penales there is great poverty. Because this is also a population with its own rules, with its own authorities, although corruption reigns. That is the first thing, corruption: the one entering, the one leaving, the one who is authority. I believe the penitentiary system has been among the most corrupted, though later we know of jailbreaks, the purchase of liberties. There, inside, we come to know of persons who have been inside five, six, seven years, without sentences. Without any idea of how many more years they will remain. They've already been there a year, two years. They're assigned a state-appointed lawyer who doesn't help much, doesn't counsel much, because they're paid by the government. They're paid by the system.*

*Inside, you see a great many injustices, abuses, human rights violations, besides there being more innocent persons than guilty...*

### **Interviewing Aureliano (2013)**

The scene is a small rectangular living room in the apartment I rent in Oaxaca City. I have known Aureliano for almost a year, he has visited several times so that I can listen to him. During our interviews he sits on a simple yet heavy wooden chair, deliberately avoiding the two matching sofas covered in plastic, a smaller and a bigger one, in an L-shape across from the door and the window. They were low and not particularly comfortable, with a tendency to make its occupant feel slightly splayed out. Yet most other guests and interviewees would still normally opt for the longer couch over the stiff wooden chair. I would sit in the smaller plastic-covered couch, facing the short edge of the coffee table. On an early visit, Aureliano tried the sofa, but he couldn't stand it and after a moment he stood up and walked over to the chair, where he sat thenceforth. The wooden chair positioned his body slightly higher than my own, and the rectitude or verticality it imposed on it seemed to comfort him. He sits, with angular legs, his lower legs crossed below him, leaning forward, hands in motion upon his knees, then in the air, moving, now with his hands tucked under his outer thighs near his knees, later holding his knees, clutching them, suddenly straightening to think, his back vertical, and leaning forward to recount...

*There are events in life so terrible*—says Aureliano, echoing Vallejo's ragged verses, which I introduced this chapter with—*that sometimes I feel like a cat with seven lives.*" Aureliano's round, earth-colored face often looks as though it were made of stone, but a moment after uttering this quip about being cat, his black eyes suddenly widen and flash, the skin of his face tightens, his thin lips part and reveal a grin, one can almost see gleaming white Cheshire fangs—and he laughs! A two-syllable burst, like a rooster or thick wood cracked by fire. Then, as rapidly as it emerged, this bursting energy retracts; the smile hangs on

his lips a few more seconds, but the gleam in his eyes has absconded again. He shifts in his chair, his eyes resume their vigilant shuffle, and his lips and his thin moustache begin slowly moving again:

*Maybe there will be another time for us to talk about that—“that” being how he joined The Organization, the act that turned everything, becoming the silent axis of his life, as that of a kaleidoscope through which everything else is refracted. It’s not that I don’t want to elaborate, he talks quickly with pauses, it’s not that I don’t want to talk; it’s just that there is always something stopping me, that doesn’t let me talk. It’s that problem I lived through. It’s that pressure. Sometimes it’s necessary. Sometimes it’s normal, but no. Like I said, sometimes yes. Life has hit me so hard that sometimes I wish I could see the other side of life, you know? The other side of this world. Because since I was a boy, over my forty, forty-five years, that’s what I have been—sadness, grief, injustice; I have lacked everything. When will I be a human that really lives like a human? Not always wondering why there is nothing to eat and no money, not thinking, what will I do tomorrow because I have no work? It’s not that I don’t want to work, it’s that you’ve been beaten so many times that you don’t even know where it hurts. If an older person (abuelito) of sixty complains of rheumatism, now imagine—torture, the consequences happen across time. Physical and psychological torture,—his words sputter and start—is pain. That you will never be able to eliminate. You can eliminate it, maybe, through therapies. The will to keep living, the will to want to keep enjoying this life. But that pain will never disappear. That sadness, that memory, those nightmares, never. They will be there. They will stay. It is our daily bread. Yes—and again that sudden contraction of his face and the bi-syllabic crackle of laughter.*

*The thing is, anything, a bitter cafecito like this, he says as he lifts the mug and lowers it again. Aureliano has told me before that the way I prepare coffee, dark and “bitter”, reminds him of the coffee they would give him underground, during the time that he was disappeared. I begin to apologize, cutting him off, promising that I won’t make it so dark next time. —No, no, no, no, no, no, he now cuts me off, a cafecito*

*like this, I don't mean that I can't drink it. It's just that everything that takes me there—reminds me. Everything that leads me to that life, reminds me. So it's a nightmare that remains there. But if I don't try to say it's past, today is today and I have to live; if I don't add my grain of sand; if I don't do all I can to construct a new life, a new time—no...—* The word hovers in the air for a long few seconds, until, like a hummingbird, his voice flits and is gone, somewhere else.

### **Mototaxi 2015**

The scene is Aureliano's kitchen in Colonia Libertad, in a house on a hill, on the outskirts of Oaxaca City. He has the day off from work. He's driving a motorized rickshaw these days. He's alone with his youngest son, his eldest son works as a teacher in a different part of the state and his wife and daughter are back in the pueblo visiting her mother. He apologizes for offering me what he calls a poor meal—*frijol, quesillo, tasajo, tlayuda* (beans, Oaxaca cheese, beef cutlet, a large type of tortilla, chile).

*It always seems to be two steps backward, one step forward.* He inhales, and his eyes flash, catching yours, hooking them with his intense gaze. *Moving without moving—that's the name of a Russian book, isn't it?—it's two steps backward, one step forward.. There are entire days I can't move (a frequent remark). Weeks that I can't go outside. This house is a prison.* He nods his head and then hooks you with his gaze. Sitting across the table, you feel uncertain at times whether he is looking at you or at a point just beside or behind your head. *Today, I'm moving. Driving the mototaxi, I'm out, with people, one, two, up, down, foom, foom.* Driving the mototaxi from dawn until late at night, minus a couple of breaks for lunch and dinner.

He carries one, two, three passengers at a time in the back seat. For seven pesos hurls them away from the edge of the highway and the mototaxi base—from a bird's eye view, the rickshaws look like ladybugs crawling up the hill—inside, the passengers feel the wind hitting their faces through the open sides

of the rickshaw, whipping their hair. With every turn you feel centrifugal force in your stomach, turning onto one of the smaller dirt streets that branching out from it, winding across the mountainous urban-rural topography of Colonia Libertad.

This is a relatively young *colonia*, like those surrounding and across from it, spreading out across the skirts of the cerros (hills) that rise along either side of the Atoyac River as it runs parallel to the Pan-American Highway, which connects Oaxaca to Puebla and Mexico, and the abandoned train tracks, now forgotten and overgrown.

Fleets of crowded public buses, minivans, *taxis colectivos*, private cars, trucks, motorcycles, and bicycles move a steady stream of people, noisily rushing along three lanes in one direction and three in the other, stopping frequently, at red lights and numerous stops and junctions, clustering on the side of the road to pick up and drop off passengers, then rushing to the left lane to circumvent the next cluster up ahead.

These colonias and barrios are mostly recent settlements, fast growing in the spaces between Oaxaca's western periphery and the nearby Zapotec towns around Etlá. Houses made of cinder block or corrugated iron, laboriously erected over recent years and decades by migrants from rural communities in other parts of the state.

A patchwork of *barrios populares* (working class neighborhoods), small industries, farmlands, and commercial businesses flank both sides of the heavily transited valley corridor leading in and out of Oaxaca City. Mirroring the movement of water when it runs down the cerros in the rainy season—rivulets converging into streams converging with others in their descent towards the Atoyac—so, too, the dirt roads on the cerros converge onto the asphalt of larger roads that widen and drain onto the highway below. In the rainy season, on most afternoons, the slanting streets actually become rivers during storms. Yet potable water is scarce and its acquisition difficult and expensive in these colonias, particularly during the dry

season.

A large junction, its importance signified by the convergence of mototaxis, the market, a pedestrian bridge crossing over the highway. People step off buses and *taxis colectivos* throughout the day, thinning but persisting into the night, people returning from work in the city or other Central Valley towns, others from the market or other business; they flag down a mototaxi to take them up the hill, toward home, or closer to home, or on a visit—up the hill, the mototaxi’s engine straining, hurling the passengers inside its antennaed red shell over streets scarred by potholes, to unnumbered houses (*casas sin número*) on streets whose names few people know and still fewer use. More often, they are identified with other geographic markers: the evangelical church, the cantina, the boundary-stone (*la mojonera*) the house where they sell tortillas.

The mototaxi: An Indian-designed exterior adapted and creolized, protected by the images of the Virgin of Guadalupe and the local Virgin of Juquilita, and little else: In a collision with a truck or a tumble down the hillsides of the colonia, the red (or green or yellow) exoskeleton of a mototaxi offers little protection to its occupants.

*Serving on the Comité de Mototaxistas* (directive committee of local mototaxi drivers), very busy now on account of the *Transportation Reform*.

Throughout our meeting of several hours, he keeps bringing up *the day they re-appeared me* (“el día que me aparecieron”). This often happens during our conversations: He tries repeatedly to begin narrating, in order to illustrate the difficulty of narrating a single day, the complexity of one day and the concatenation of so many; yet he can’t.

As often happens during our interviews, he repeatedly stresses the difficulty, the near impossibility of speaking about what has happened to him, uttering his memories, narrating his past. His speech in tension, talking about immobility, erupting into expansive tangents that drive circles around the matter at

hand, which he wants to lay out, but with each gathering of speed towards the target, he overshoots each time. In the act, he outlines some of the contours of (that which cannot be said), or on very few occasions, a more substantive fragment, a thing itself, pieces or sense of an episode, falls from his mouth onto the table, unexpected and raw. Sometimes we retain it, other times it vanishes, leaving only mist where it had appeared.

-\*-



## Epilogue

### Loxicha, 2018

#### Scene

*“El albergue,” the Loxicha shelter in Oaxaca City—a long U-shaped concrete building with an inner courtyard, where Abraham and Zacarías live with their families and more than fifty other people from Loxicha. The shelter was a government concession to the Loxicha movement in exchange for ending the Loxicha women’s four year-long protest in Oaxaca’s Zócalo plaza in 2001, as part of the 2001 Amnesty Law agreements that freed the prisoners with state charges. For years, the shelter was administered by Juan Sosa Maldonado (preface), the former prisoner and one-time spokesperson for the prisoners, who has been in exile since 2014. After getting out of prison in 2017, Abraham has taken on the role of authority and organizer inside the shelter, where he lives with his infant daughter; his wife is serving a 35 year sentence at the Tanivet women’s prison. A few months later, Zacarías and his family joined them. Struggling to re-establish themselves after twenty years in prison, Zacarías and Abraham are working on setting up a woodshop in the shelter for Zacarías; meanwhile, Abraham and his wife weave baskets and purses, using the techniques he learned in Ixcotel prison, which he sells to tourists and shoppers in the Zócalo or grocery store parking lots.*

After nearly twenty years in state and federal prisons, Álvaro and Abraham obtained a conditional early release and left Ixcotel Prison on the night of July 7, 2017. Then, in October, Zacarías followed suit, becoming the last of the original (post-1996, alleged EPR) Loxicha prisoners to obtain his freedom.

When I first began my research on the Loxicha story in 2012, seven Loxicha prisoners remained in prison—the last seven of the approximately two hundred and fifty Xiche Zapotecs (or “Loxichas”) who were incarcerated in the late 1990s in connection with the Popular Revolutionary Army’s attack on soldiers and police in La Crucecita Huatulco, on August 28-29, 1996. More than five years later, in the final days of

2017 and the first days of 2018, I met with the last three Loxicha prisoners to walk out of prison—Álvaro, Abraham, and Zacarías—in Oaxaca City. Almost six years after I first met “los Loxichas,” and began recording oral histories with five of them—particularly, the aforementioned three—I had my first interactions with them outside of a prison. After years of visiting these men in different prisons and working with them and their families, in alternating capacities as “anthro-historian,” friend, or *compañero*; after years of living in their hometown, documenting and studying their political struggles and their oral histories/stories—I was able to meet them for the first time *en libertad*.

After years immersed in the worlds of Loxicha and its prisoners, as a scholar and an activist, and having assembled an archive of original interviews and photographs drawn from the prisoners’ extended social and political networks, it was exciting and emotive for me (probably more so than for them) to be able, for the first time, to record our interviews with an audio recorder, without fear of missing words, expressions, and sounds that I couldn’t always capture with only ears, pen and notebook, during our prison interviews; not to mention, without the anxiety around the act of discussing politically sensitive issues with political prisoners—inside the prison—recording their testimonies in the midst of ramparts, cells, guards.

Just as I began this dissertation with a sort of “tale of two prisons,” or two tales of getting into prison for the first time, I conclude with two tales of liberation: The first one involves re-defining my relationship to the newly former prisoners, as researcher collaborators, practicing this six year-old relationship outside of the confines of prison, in freedom, for the first time. The second tale of liberation concerns the ex-prisoners themselves and their own reflections on the meanings of freedom and un-freedom, seen from the vantage point of newly gained freedom after twenty years as prisoners. What does freedom mean to someone who has just emerged from decades of incarceration? And what does freedom from prison do in the context of reconstructing human voices in the wake of mobilizations, state violence, and social abandonment?

In June 2017, just a few weeks before their release (although none of us knew this at the time), I visited Álvaro and Abraham in Ixcotel Prison for a rushed hour-long visit under the supervision of a prison social worker—a far cry from the unmonitored six-hour visits I used to spend with them in years prior—without knowing or expecting that the next time we met would be on the outside. By that time, Álvaro and Abraham had submitted appeals for their early release, with the assistance of a “new” lawyer—if a familiar name among Mexico’s radical left, himself another erstwhile high-profile political prisoner—Felipe Canseco Ruiz .

When I visited Álvaro and Abraham in Ixcotel in June, neither of them expressed confidence that this latest effort would result in their freedom—unsurprisingly, after so many years of frustrated political and legal battles, of failed (or partially successful) legal actions, of hopeful proclamations and disappointed appeals. During our brief meeting, Álvaro and I discussed tentative plans to meet back there, in Ixcotel, again six months later, upon my next visit to Oaxaca. These visits would now take place, for the purposes of getting through the prison door, under the pretense of “purchasing handicrafts” from Álvaro, since the Ixcotel prison authorities had recently canceled visitation rights for “friends.”

## **Eleuterio**

The first one (of the last seven) to get out in 2015, quietly and without fanfare, was the one I got to know the least: Eleuterio, or “Tello.” Of the last seven Loxichas in prison, Eleuterio and Justino were the only two who declined my invitation to record their oral histories; therefore, my relationship with these two prisoners was relegated, for the most part, to that of a respectful handshake and saludo, upon arriving and leaving, during my visits to cell 22 in Ixcotel prison. Justino, the youngest of the Loxichas serving long-term

prison sentences, eventually shared a few pieces of his story and his mind with me, at Álvaro's invitation, over agua de pepino at one of the food stalls near the patio in Ixcotel—but this was not until December, 2016, and then only informally, without my notebook and pen between us.

Eleuterio, on the other hand, never exchanged more than a couple of words with me at a time—buenos días or buenas tardes, as I came in or out of cell 22. It was partly because his knowledge of Spanish was quite limited—he arrived in prison speaking almost none—as was my knowledge of Loxicha Zapotec. But he also seemed most comfortable maintaining a low profile, staying out of politics and trouble. Like Justino, Eleuterio had little or no interest in being a “political prisoner,” or a political anything, and preferred to keep his head down, his presence discreet, and silently await the end of his sentence and this torment. In spite of my explanations and of my having already established relationships based around this activity (recording oral histories) with the other four prisoners at Ixcotel—sharing his testimony with me, a stranger with an unclear (or unintelligible) agenda, through the lens of 15 years of prison and of being dragged through a forced performance of “political prisoner,” probably sounded like an unnecessary risk without clear benefits. Nevertheless, both Eleuterio and Justino remained respectful and courteous towards me: the obligatory handshake and smile in passing at each of my visits to the prison. And I still ended up spending time in their midst by being with the others, in and around the confines of cell 22 and the outdoor corridor between it and the rampart.

From the others, I learned that Eleuterio was from Magdalena Loxicha, in the lower parts of the municipality, near the coast. Most of those who knew Tello agreed that in his pre-carceral life he was foreign to Loxicha's indigenous movement, the OPIZ, and politics, in general. One former prisoner claimed that he was among the "contras" who opposed the movement, but, overall, most considered him generally apolitical.

Agustín and Fortino, the former municipal president and síndico in 1996, also denied having any

involvement with the OPIZ or the movement around it; however, they were not apolitical: Before prison, both had been openly political actors, as municipal authorities and as teachers in the dissident teachers' union (Sección 22); and later, in prison, they both inhabited and performed the role of "political prisoner." As prisoners, they spoke of themselves as scapegoats and as victims of the state, but as victims of Loxicha's radicals, too. Thus, they rejected any connections to the OPIZ, the organization that became the main target of the government's counterinsurgency in Loxicha after 1996 (and consequently, the main target and instigator of the Loxicha trials and sentences); yet they still considered themselves victims of politically motivated repression and incarceration. Whereas, Álvaro, Abraham, and Zacarías all recognize their former militancy in the OPIZ.

On the other hand, the general sentiment regarding Eleuterio and Justino was that they were both non-politicized young men who got swept up accidentally, amidst the frenzy of violence and arrests, in a net that was intentionally too wide: circumstantial victims of a state violence that was excessive and arbitrary by design.

Eleuterio seemed most comfortable in silence, fading into the background. Each time I visited cell 22 I would find him sitting outside the cell, on a little stool by a metal beam under the sheet metal roof that covered the Loxichas' self-made altar to the Virgin. Like many other prisoners at Ixcotel, Eleuterio worked every day sewing soccer balls, one of the lowest paying jobs available in the prison. Always working and always alone, Eleuterio was the only one of the seven Loxichas who was single, and he never received any visitors—except for a nephew who joined the solidarity brigade of relatives and friends in 2013 when the seven Loxichas were transferred to CEFERESO 13, the high security federal prison outside Miahuatlán.

When I met with Abraham and Zacarías in the albergue, during my first encounters with them

outside of prison, in December 2017 and January 2018, they told me that Tello had gotten out in March of 2015—the first of the last seven Loxichas to gain his freedom—with the help of a public defender (*abogado de oficio*) who submitted an appeal on his behalf. According to Abraham and Zacarías, Tello had all of his charges dropped with this appeal. “He left absolved,” said Abraham, “but he lost twenty years.” Tello could have sued the state for keeping him in prison so many years on false charges, Abraham said to me—yet he would not, because “he doesn’t want to know anything else.” He just wanted to get out and put all of it behind him, forget it ever happened. When he got out, there were no press conferences, statements, or celebrations. When he received word of his imminent release from the authorities at Ixcotel, he went to Agustín, whom he had always been closest to among the prisoners, and asked to borrow \$200 pesos for a bus fare. “So Agustín loaned him the two hundred pesos, and Tello got out. That’s how it happened, he won his appeal. He left absolved! [In the end,] they found him not guilty, but, still—twenty years locked up!”

The day he got out, he walked out to the prison gate with his things, and there he called Tanis, the erstwhile *barrikadera* (whom I introduce in chapter 2), who had visited and supported the Loxichas for many years. She picked him up and took him to her house for a few days. Three days after he got out, Abraham’s son, Hermelo, ran into Tello in the Central de Abastos market, and found him “trembling, all alone; he didn’t know the city.” A few days later, his nephew, Benito, the same one who joined the solidarity brigades in 2013, who knew the city a little better, picked up Tello from Ch.’s house, since he knew the city better. Eventually, they said, he finally returned home to Magdalena Loxicha.

### **Agustín and Fortino**

The next prisoners to obtain their freedom were Agustín and Fortino, the two former teachers and municipal authorities, in December 2016. After years of working with different social movement lawyers

(Israel Ochoa Lara and his team, Father Uvi and his team, Section 22 lawyers) — in the end, it was also a public defender who secured Agustín and Fortino’s freedom. According to Álvaro, during our conversation in Ixcotel in July 2017, Agustín and Fortino contacted the public defender in mid-2016, who then submitted an appeal to request the two prisoners’ early release, which they were legally entitled to after completing two thirds of their sentence. In response to the appeal, a judge offered Agustín and Fortino a deal: an early release granting them conditional freedom, if they agreed to paying the court for “damage reparations” an amount between \$100,000-\$150,000 pesos, in monthly payments over two years, as well as coming in every two weeks to sign forms, and a few other symbolic conditions (eg, committing to not doing drugs or committing crimes). “Libertad a crédito.”

When this worked out for Agustín and Fortino, Álvaro and Abraham followed suit, contacting a public defender to put forth the same appeal as the former two. A few months later, the judge offered Álvaro and Abraham similar deals, which they accepted.

## **Justino**

After Agustín and Fortino got out in December, Justino was the next to leave prison, in February 2017. The youngest of the last seven prisoners, Justino was only twenty years old when he was imprisoned (in 1997?); the day he walked out, he was just over forty. At that point, he had spent literally half of his life—and nearly his entire adult life—in prison.

Like Eleuterio, Justino also shunned attention and politics as much as possible. Unlike their older companions who had once been teachers, authorities and organizers, neither of the two quiet men had ever traveled outside of their communities in Loxicha (Magdalena Loxicha and San Vicente Yogondoy) before being sent to prison. "He was just a *chamaco* (a kid) when he got in," the other Loxicha prisoners said about

him. Inside Ixcotel, like the quiet and apolitical Eleuterio, Justino tended to keep to himself, working silently, assembling soccer balls for pennies, every day. In the days before the Loxichas were transferred to federal prison in 2013, during my visits to Cell 22, I would usually find Justino working at his preferred spot: sitting on a stool outside by the door to cell 22 and the limonero tree. Most of them having lived in cell 22 for more than a decade, they all had their favorite spots, inside the cell or outside, depending on the weather and the hour, near the altar or the limonero.

His happiest moments seemed to be during the visits from his wife and son, who was around five years old in 2013. In those moments, I witnessed his face beaming, grinning childishly and sweetly as he played with the child, lifting him in the air amidst squeals of laughter from the boy, who otherwise spoke almost not at all. Or he would grin at his wife and whisper in her ear in an attempt at discrete seduction, as she batted his hand away from her breast. She often seemed sullen and focused. She had lost one of her legs, amputated above the knee, due to an illness that went untreated for too long; so she walked with crutches and difficulty, particularly when toting her son as well as a heap of plastic woven bags that she sold on the streets.

One of the few times that Justino and I spoke in Ixcotel—in 2016, after being transferred back to Ixcotel from federal prison—I asked Justino where he would go after he got out of there. He replied that he would go back to San Vicente where his father lives and has some land. His father was also a prisoner, for a few years, in the late nineties. Some of the other prisoners said that it was Justino's father who had in fact been a compa in the Organization; Justino was just a "chamaco" who “didn't know anything”—but ended up paying for it anyway, with twenty years of his life.

In June 2017, I ran into Justino, completely by surprise, in the Zócalo plaza in Oaxaca City.



Recognizing each other from a distance, we greeted one another and embraced, even though we had not been that close when he was in prison—yet this was my first time seeing any of the last seven Loxichas in freedom. He was now selling woven bags, the same as his wife, a craft which they both learned in Ixcotel. He carried a handful of them in one hand, a solid explosion of colored patterns. His other hand held an assortment of animal-shaped wooden keychains (these he did not make, but bought elsewhere to resell).

We sat in front of the gazebo in the Zócalo and talked for a while. I reminded Justino of our conversation back in Ixcotel, when he told me that he wished to return to his old home in San Vicente Yogondoy once he was out of prison. I asked him if that was still his plan or his desire. Yes, he would have liked to go back, he replied; but, unfortunately, that was impossible at the moment. When he got out of prison, he proposed going to San Vicente with his wife and their son. But she would not have it. Loxicha was not her home, nor did she speak their language; moreover, life in a rural village, far from medical clinics and hospitals, would be difficult for a woman with one leg. So she informed him that if he wished to return there, he was free to do so—but it would be without her or their son. After all, she had supported their son alone for eight years, practically on her own, and also him. In Oaxaca City, she had access to basic health services and their son was enrolled in school there. She would not abandon these things. And Justino stayed. Now they both sold their woven plastic handbags on the street—sometimes in the Zócalo, but most often in the parking lot of a Chedrahui grocery store on the Periférico avenue.

### **Agustín Luna**

Agustín Luna and Fortino Enriquez—the erstwhile teachers and municipal authorities of San Agustín Loxicha in 1996—obtained their freedom in December 2016. I spoke with Agustín by telephone shortly after his release, and again a year later, in December 2017. By then he had been living free from

prison for a year, living mostly in Oaxaca City. But when we spoke the second time he was in his home village of Santa Cruz de las Flores Loxicha, a few hours walk from San Agustín. “Amigo antropólogo,” he greeted me through his cell phone (another form of freedom). I asked him how we was doing; how freedom felt; what he was up to. He was in very good spirits. In spite of the sad death of a relative, Agustín said he was happy to be surrounded by his family, many of whom he had not seen since before going to prison in 1996.

### **Reflections on Freedom after Prison**

For Eleuterio, freedom in its early days felt like a trembling cold on the streets around La Central, in the streets around the bustling urban market of Oaxaca and the second class bus station, the streets of street vendors, travelers, transients, beggars, drivers, passengers, sellers, and buyers, busy feet. It meant the continuation of old relationships of care, through Chivis. And a return to silence—that is, at least to me, in my current subject position, with my connections to Abraham, Álvaro, Zacarías. For Justino, freedom in its earliest days meant renouncing an aspiration to return “home” to the pueblo, to San Vicente Yogondoy. It meant staying in Oaxaca City with his wife and son, weaving and selling baskets, like Abraham, just as they did in prison, although they now do it on the streets of the city.

Álvaro’s exit from prison was marked by the gathering of solidary compas at the gates of Ixcotel, which led to a celebration over tlayudas in the street until dawn. In the following days, he published a letter, directed to other adherents of the Sixth, in which he celebrated his new freedom, thanked others for their solidarity, but stated that prison exists even outside of prison. Freedom has meant living with his grown children once more (their mother, Álvaro’s wife, died of cancer in 2015) in a suburban-rural town forty minutes outside of Oaxaca City. And it has meant dealing with the same “damage reparations” as

Abraham—although Álvaro has largely chosen to ignore these, until he is able to deal with them. Most significantly, for Álvaro, freedom brought with it the ability to travel to the “rebel territory” of the Zapatistas in Chiapas and to witness (a sliver of life in) their autonomous indigenous communities. After years of living and struggling as an adherent to the Sixth Declaration of the Lacandón Jungle (“The Sixth”) and a Zapatista supporter, for Álvaro to visit Zapatista territory was akin to undertaking a spiritual pilgrimage to a popular sacred site, although the trek was political and the site insurgent. In October of 2017, for several days Álvaro traveled with other adherents of The Sixth and members of the National Indigenous Congress (CNI) to all five of the Zapatista caracoles or regions, as part of a caravan to support Marichuy, the first Zapatista-CNI pre-candidate to the Mexican presidency.

Freedom for Abraham meant the first taste of pineapple in twenty years; the first orange, coconut, strawberry—all of these fruits were banned inside the prisons, so as to prevent the inmates from fermenting them for alcohol. For Abraham, the end of prison and the arrival of freedom meant making a new home in the “Loxichas” old refuge — the albergue, or shelter. At first, freedom meant feelings of disorientation and paranoia, fear of leaving the shelter. A year on, it meant reorganizing the shelter, caring for his young daughter, weaving and selling purses and baskets, in collaboration with his wife, who remains in prison at Tanivet, an hour or two away. It has also meant dealing with the “damage reparations” imposed by a federal court, in exchange for his “early release.”

For Zacarías, freedom also brought early days of paranoia and immobility. It has also meant living in the shelter with his wife and three (soon to be four) children, and teaming up with his old compa, Abraham, in an effort to set up a carpentry shop in the shelter—a difficult project, due to the lack of cabling, yet a promising one, given Zacarías’ former status as a highly sought master carpenter in the Etna Valley, in his days as a prisoner in Etna State Prison.

On December 29, 2017, I sat down to talk with Abraham, just as we used to in Ixcotel Prison, but now—for the first time—in a place that was not prison. We met in his room in the Loxicha shelter: a heavy desk and a couple of chairs; woven bags on the floor; on the wall, a poster calling for solidarity with Abraham; in the back of the room, hidden behind half walls, a mattress on the floor and some clothes.

Early evening, darkening early in the winter night. Outside, the sounds of children playing and running, dogs barking, a television blaring, muffled by the corrugated metal door. We sat on folding metal chairs, a heavy desk between us. Abraham sat with noticeable comfort, pride, and presence behind the desk, often leaning back and resting the back of his head hands behind his back on interlaced fingers, stretching his legs out to one side of the desk. The way he held his body and occupied space was pregnant with meanings: expressions of newfound freedoms; silent reflections of mutually held knowledge of the fact that I had witnessed his life in prison; negative anti-reflections of prison life, expressions of a non-prison state. I had witnessed the quotidian realities of Abraham's life in Ixcotel prison's Loxicha microcosm. I had been his "guest" there (inasmuch as a prisoner can be a consenting host inside prison space). Thus, as we sat across the desk from each other in the shelter, I kept thinking: that he knew that I knew the world he was emerging from; he knew that I had seen it; and he knew that my relationship to him as a free persons was framed and tinged by our previous relationship—as prisoner and visitor—and by my knowledge of his recently-past life as a prisoner. So he sat comfortably: spread out, filling out the space with his extended limbs and warm words of hospitality—no longer prisoner and visitor, but a genuine host and guest, for the first time.

Abraham and Álvaro got out of prison on July 7, 2017. It was a Friday night and it was raining

when the prison warden (director) came to the door of the cell and called him by name: “Abraham García Ramírez—pick up your things because you’re going free.” In that moment he didn’t believe it, since he still had another ten years left in his thirty year sentence.

*But I got out—without picking up any of my things! The director escorted me to the prison offices (jefatura). There they began doing their [medical] exams on me, like always; they made me sign papers and leave my finger print on documents; they asked me what crimes I was charged with, the date of my arrest, my age, how many years in prison—all of that they asked me. After going through all the paperwork, the sub-director came around with a voucher for safe passage [boleta de salvoconducto]. This “safepassage” is what they gave to me, signed by a judge from the 8th District of Oaxaca, as a form of identification. If I go visit the pueblo or go anywhere out anywhere, I have to keep it with me at all times, in case I pass through any [military or police] checkpoints—this is the document that will save me. Because I have no other form of identification, such as a [federal identification] credencial de elector.*

### **They won’t let you take out a new identification?**

*No, I’ve tried on two or three occasions, and they’ve said no, not until I complete the full [thirty year] sentence. So, after handing me that document, they opened the Big Gate [puerta grande], and I got out around eleven at night. It was raining heavily. The director and the officers walked me all the way to the outer gate.*

*(My son) José had already left for the United States. So (my other son) Hermelo was the only one who went to get me.*

*But, as soon as I got out of there, after twenty years of being locked up in prison, I was gripped by a fear of leaving. Because, out here is freedom. But I had also become accustomed to being taken care of in there. You could almost say they took care of me in there. Twenty years of living under insults, under shouting, under threats and psychological torture. If you’re not authorized [to do this or the other], you’re not authorized. One can’t argue with them. And out here, well no...*

*So, as soon as I got out my son and the lawyer [who was there too] said to me, “let’s go get tlayudas [Oaxacan street food].” We got to the tlayudas around one in the morning—who knows where, in the center of the city: Me and el compañero Álvaro; the lawyer, Felipe; also other compas from the Other Campaign who were supporting Álvaro; and Erica, Álvaro’s daughter—we all went together.*

### **To celebrate?**

*To celebrate, we all went together to celebrate. Later on, around two in the morning, everyone went to their own home. I came here [to the shelter]; my son was working, but he didn’t*

*know how I was feeling. I didn't want to go outside, not even to peek into the street. I locked myself away for about fifteen days. I had this fear of leaving.*

*Little by little, I started going out.*

-\*-

## Bibliography

### ARCHIVES CONSULTED

Archivo General de la Nación (AGN)  
Archivo General del Poder Judicial del Estado de Oaxaca (AGPJO)  
Archivo General del Poder Ejecutivo del Estado de Oaxaca (AGPEO)  
Archivo Municipal San Agustín Loxicha  
Archivo Parroquial San Agustín Loxicha  
Archivo Personal Bufete Jurídico, Asesoría Jurídica Popular

### PUBLISHED SOURCES

- Agamben, Giorgio. *State of Exception*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- Agee, James. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men: Three Tenant Families*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960.
- Amin, Shahid. *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura, 1922-1992*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.
- Appadurai, Arjun. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
- Bartra, Armando. *Guerrero bronco : campesinos, ciudadanos y guerrilleros en la Costa Grande*. Tepepan, México, D.F.: Ediciones sinfiltro, 1996.
- Beam de Azcona, Rosemary Grace. "A Coatlán-Loxicha Zapotec Grammar." University of California, Berkeley, 2004.
- Beezley, William H., Cheryl English Martin, and William E. French, eds. *Rituals of Rule, Rituals of Resistance: Public Celebrations and Popular Culture in Mexico*. Latin American Silhouettes. Wilmington, Del: SR Books, 1994.
- Behar, Ruth. "Rage and Redemption : Reading the Life Story of a Mexican Marketing Woman." In *The Dialogic Emergence of Culture*, edited by Dennis Tedlock and Bruce Mannheim, 223–58. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995.
- . *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1996.
- . *Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza's Story*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2003.
- . *Women Writing Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.
- Bellingieri, Marco. *Del agrarismo armado a la guerra de los pobres: ensayos de guerrilla rural en el México contemporáneo, 1940-1974*. Mexico, D.F.: Ediciones Casa Juan Pablos : Gobierno del Distrito Federal, Secretaría de Cultura de la Ciudad de México, 2003.
- Blacker, O Neill. "Cold War in the Countryside: Conflict in Guerrero, Mexico." *The Americas* 66, no. 2 (2009).
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984.
- Castellanos, Laura, and Alejandro Jiménez Martín del Campo. *México Armado 1943-1981*. Mexico, D.F.:

- Ediciones Era, 2007.
- Cedillo, Adela. "El fuego y el silencio : historia de las Fuerzas de Liberación Nacional mexicanas (1969-1974)." Ediciones Pirata, 2008.
- Cedillo, Adela Calderón, and Fernando Calderón, eds. *Revolutionary Struggles and the Dirty War, 1964-1982*. New York: Routledge, 2012.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.
- . *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000.
- Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos (CNDH). "Informe Especial : Caso de La Región Loxicha," 2003.
- Cook, Maria Lorena. *Organizing Dissent : Unions, the State, and the Democratic Teachers' Movement in Mexico*. University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996.
- Davis, Natalie Zemon. *Fiction in the Archives : Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France*. Stanford University Press, 1987.
- Dwyer, Kevin. *Moroccan Dialogues: Anthropology in Question / Muhammad, Faqir*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982.
- Eiss, Paul K. *In the Name of El Pueblo : Place, Community, and the Politics of History in Yucatán*. Durham, 2010.
- EZLN. "Sexta Declaración de La Selva Lacandona." *Enlace Zapatista* (blog), 2005.  
<http://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2005/06/30/sexta-declaracion-de-la-selva-lacandona/>.
- Figueroa-Ibarra, Carlos, and Lorena Martínez-Zavala. "The Ejército Popular Revolucionario: Occupying the Cracks in Mexico's Hegemonic State." *Latin American Perspectives* 40, no. 5 (2013): 153–64.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage Books, 1995.
- Friedberg, Jill Irene. *Un poquito de tanta verdad : A little bit of so much truth*. Seattle, WA: Corrugated Films, 2006.
- Gerhard, Peter. *A Guide to the Historical Geography of New Spain*. Rev. ed. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993.
- Gibler, John. *Tzompaxtle: la fuga de un guerrillero*. Mexico, D.F.: Tusquets Editores, 2014.
- Gibson, Charles. *The Aztecs under Spanish Rule: A History of the Indians of the Valley of Mexico, 1519-1810*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1964.
- Guha, Ranajit. *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*. Delhi: Oxford, 1983.
- Hale, Charles R. "Activist Research v. Cultural Critique: Indigenous Land Rights and the Contradictions of Politically Engaged Anthropology." *Cultural Anthropology* 21, no. 1 (2006): 96–120.  
<https://doi.org/10.1525/can.2006.21.1.96>.
- Hébrard, Jean. "The Writings of Moïse (1898-1985): Birth, Life, and Death of a Narrative of the Great War." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 44, no. 2 (2002).
- Hirschkind, Charles. *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics*. Cultures of History; Variation: Cultures of History. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.
- Hobsbawm, Eric. *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1965.
- Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI). "Censo de Población y Vivienda 2010," 2010.  
<http://en.www.inegi.org.mx/proyectos/ccpv/2010/>.
- Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR). "The Human Rights Situation in Mexico," 2016.  
<https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/reports/pdfs/Mexico2016-en.pdf>.
- Johnson, Paul C. *Diaspora Conversions: Black Carib Religion and the Recovery of Africa*. Berkeley:



- University of California Press, 2007.
- Joseph, G. M. *In from the Cold: Latin America's New Encounter with the Cold War* / Spenser, Daniela. American Encounters/Global Interactions; Variation: American Encounters/Global Interactions. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008.
- Juris, Jeffrey. *Networking Futures: The Movements against Corporate Globalization*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008.
- Kirsch, Stuart. *Engaged Anthropology: Politics beyond the Text*. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2018.
- Labov, William. "On the Mechanism of Linguistic Change." In *Directions in Sociolinguistics: The Ethnography of Communication*, edited by John Gumperz and Dell Hymes, 512–38. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972.
- Lomnitz-Adler, Claudio. *Death and the Idea of Mexico*. Brooklyn, N.Y. : Zone Books ; Cambridge, Mass. : Distributed by MIT Press, 2005.
- Low, Setha M. *On the Plaza: The Politics of Public Space and Culture*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000.
- Mannheim, Bruce, and Dennis Tedlock. "Introduction." In *The Dialogic Emergence of Culture*, edited by Dennis Tedlock and Bruce Mannheim. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995.
- Martínez Luna, Jaime. *Comunalidad y desarrollo*. Cultura indígena; México, D.F. : CONACULTA : Centro de Apoyo al Movimiento Popular Oaxaqueño, 2003.
- . *Eso que llaman comunalidad*. México, D.F. : Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes : Fundación Alfredo Harp Helú Oaxaca, 2010.
- Martínez Vásquez, Víctor Raúl. *Autoritarismo, movimiento popular y crisis política: Oaxaca 2006*. Oaxaca: Universidad Autónoma Benito Juárez de Oaxaca, 2007.
- Montemayor, Carlos. *La guerrilla recurrente*. México: Debate, 2007.
- Nash, June C. *Mayan Visions: The Quest for Autonomy in an Age of Globalization*. New York: Routledge, 2001.
- Oikión Solano, Verónica, and Marta Eugenia García Ugarte, eds. *Movimientos armados en México, siglo XX*. Zamora, Michoacán: Colegio de Michoacán; México, DF: CIESAS, 2006.
- Osorno, Diego Enrique. *Oaxaca Sitiada: la primera insurrección del siglo XXI*. México, D.F. : Grijalbo : Random House Mondadori, 2007.
- Padilla, Tanalís. *Rural Resistance in the Land of Zapata: The Jaramillista Movement and the Myth of the Pax Priista, 1940-1962*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008.
- Paz, Octavio. *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, o, Las trampas de la fe*. Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1982.
- Reyes Peláez, Juan Fernando. "El Largo Brazo Del Estado: La Estrategia Contrainsurgente Del Gobierno Mexicano." In *Movimientos armados en México, siglo XX*, edited by Verónica Oikión Solano and Marta Eugenia García Ugarte. Zamora, Michoacán: Colegio de Michoacán; México, DF: CIESAS, 2006.
- Romo Cedano, Pablo, and Yaiza Ariana Rodríguez, eds. *Desapariciones forzadas en México: documentos del proceso de la Comisión de Mediación, el PDPR-EPR y el Gobierno Federal*. México, D.F.: Ediciones SeraPaz, 2010.
- Rosaldo, Renato. *The Day of Shelly's Death: The Poetry and Ethnography of Grief*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014.
- Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.
- Scott, James C. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985.

- Sotelo, José, ed. "Informe Histórico a La Sociedad Mexicana, ¡Qué No Vuelva a Suceder! (Borrador Del Informe de La Fiscalía Especial Para Movimientos Sociales y Políticos Del Pasado)," 2006. <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB209/index.htm>.
- Speed, Shannon. *Rights in Rebellion: Indigenous Struggle and Human Rights in Chiapas*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2008.
- Stephen, Lynn. *We Are the Face of Oaxaca: Testimony and Social Movements*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2013.
- Stoler, Ann Laura. *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009.
- Tello Díaz, Carlos. *La rebelión de las Cañadas*. Cal y arena; Variation: Cal y arena. México, D.F.: Aguilar, León y Cal, 1995.
- Terraciano, Kevin. *The Mixtecs of Colonial Oaxaca: Ñudzahui History, Sixteenth through Eighteenth Centuries*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2001.
- Tort, Gerardo. *The guerilla and the hope Lucio Cabañas*. [México]: Macondo cine [éd.]; Chicago (Ill.): Facets video [distrib.], 2006.
- Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005.
- Ulloa Bornemann, Alberto. *Sendero en tinieblas*. México, D.F.: Ediciones Cal y Arena, 2004.
- Vaughan, Mary K. *Cultural Politics in Revolution: Teachers, Peasants, and Schools in Mexico, 1930-1940*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997.
- VOCAL. "Voces Oaxaqueñas Construyendo Autonomía y Libertad (VOCAL)." Accessed August 23, 2018. <https://regeneracionradio.org/index.php/autonomia/autonomia/item/917-voces-oaxaque%C3%B1as-construyendo-autonom%C3%ADa-y-libertad-vocal>.
- Warner, Michael. "The Mass Public and the Mass Subject." In *Publics and Counterpublics*, 159–86. New York; Cambridge, Mass.: Zone Books ; Distributed by MIT Press., 2002.
- Weld, Kirsten. *Paper Cadavers: The Archives of Dictatorship in Guatemala*. American Encounters/Global Interactions. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014.
- West, Harry G. *Kupilikula: Governance and the Invisible Realm in Mozambique*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.