

YOUTH IN MOVEMENT: THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF AUTONOMOUS  
YOUTH ACTIVISM IN SOUTHERN MEXICO

by

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## DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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This dissertation offers a unique examination of new cultures and forms of social movement organizing that include horizontal networking, non-hierarchical decision-making and governance combined with the importance of public visual art. Based on 23 months of ethnographic fieldwork, I analyze how processes of neoliberalism and globalization have influenced youth organizing and shaped experiences of historical marginalization. What makes youth activism in Southern Mexico unique from that occurring elsewhere (i.e. Occupy movements in U.S. and Europe) is the incorporation of indigenous organizing practices and identities with urban subcultures. At the same time, the movements I study share important characteristics with other social movements, including their reliance on direct-action tactics such as occupations of public space and sit-ins, as well as their creative use of digital media technologies (i.e. Arab Spring).

This research contributes to the study of social movements and popular politics, globalization, culture and resistance, and the politics of space by examining how youth activists combine everyday practices and traditional social movement actions to sustain autonomous political projects that subvert institutional and spatial hierarchies. They do so through decentralized activist networks that resist cooptation by the state and traditional

opposition parties, while at the same time contesting the spatial exclusion of marginalized communities from the city center. This research contributes a critical analysis of the limits of traditional models of social change through electoral politics and traditional opposition groups, such as labor unions, by challenging us to take seriously the innovative models of politics, culture and governance that Mexican youth are offering us. At a larger level, my work suggests the importance of genuinely engaging with alternative epistemologies that come from places we may not expect- in this case urban, indigenous, and marginalized youth.

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## CHAPTER I

### ETHNOGRAPHIC VIGNETTE: NOVEMBER 2009

I had been back in Oaxaca for six weeks and was still searching for the familiar signs of a social movement presence in the city- political graffiti, street art, posters, marches, and rallies. Where masterfully crafted political grievances in the form of murals and stenciled images had once shared space with urgent pleas for justice amateurishly inked from spray paint cans on the walls of Oaxaca City, one now found only carelessly applied paint meant to whitewash the social unrest (Figures 1 and 2). Where you once found posters pasted to city walls demanding the release of political prisoners, you now found flyers for get rich while working from home schemes (Figure 3). Street corners which were once makeshift barricades erected by neighbors trying to protect their neighborhoods from paramilitary attack, were now saturated by the presence of countless different units of local, state and national police and military forces (Figure 4). Movement rallies were replaced by government sponsored cultural events. *Was the 3-year campaign of government and paramilitary repression really victorious? Was the social movement of 2006 officially over?*

Realizing that the spaces that had belonged to the social movement during 2006 and subsequent summers were now seemingly under state control, I began to look elsewhere for movement activity. One of the first calls I made was to Abril, a teacher and militant in the Frente Magisterial Independiente Nacional (National Independent Teachers' Front or FMIN), the Asamblea Popular de las Colonias de Oaxaca (Popular Neighborhood Assembly of Oaxaca or APCO), and a vital participant in my previous research. I shared my unease with her at the apparent lack of movement activity and



increased militarization and surveillance in Oaxaca. She confirmed that yes, the government had continued its strategy of intimidation and repression, but she also assured me that the movement was not defeated, it was simply “in a different phase of the process.” She then told me of a space that some of the youth from the movement had opened downtown named CASOTA. She told me that her younger daughter was involved with the project and that I should check it out. She told me CASOTA was holding a discussion with Professor Carlos Aguirre Rojas of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) concerning the state of the Oaxacan social movement and other movements in Latin America. I thanked her and made plans to meet her at the event that Friday.

Friday afternoon came, my wife and I left our house located in a neighborhood just north of downtown and walked towards CASOTA, traveling down one of the most heavily transited streets in the center of Oaxaca. The cacophony of urban sounds and smells engulfed us, an endless stream of noisy *urbanos* (transit buses), fearless mopeds, large trucks announcing the sale of propane tanks over loudspeakers and *pipas* (water trucks) coming to refill downtown residents empty water basins, all weaving in-and-out of two lanes in that choreographed chaos so familiar in the urban Global South. After about 20 minutes of walking, I was awoken from my trance by the sight of a large black-and-white portrait of Mexican Revolutionary Emiliano Zapata painted over a maroon-colored façade. There were also political and cultural posters plastered across the exterior wall of the house, a row of Zapatistas painted along the roofline, and a spray-painted image of anarchist thinker and revolutionary Ricardo Flores Magón next to the black metal doors (Figure 5). “This has to be the place!” I thought.

One of the large metal doors was open so we knocked and entered. As I passed through the doorway, I entered into an open courtyard full of small folding metal chairs, the kind you rent for parties in Mexico for 10 pesos. There were about fifty people of all ages in the courtyard mingling, but the majority appeared to be young, working class and Oaxacan- not the tourists and local middle-class that dominate much of the surrounding downtown area. The youth were a diverse group: *anarco-punks* with facial piercings and black combat boots, *rastas* with military fatigue shorts and dreadlocks, *hip-hoperos* with their Converse All-Stars and straight-billed baseball caps, and *universitarios* in polo shirts and jeans. Youth mingled with elders who ran the gamut from housewives and teachers to indigenous activists and *campesinos* (peasants).

The next thing I noticed was a large hand painted banner draped across the back wall. The banner was black and red with the words “Ni perdón, ni olvido” (We won’t forgive, nor forget) over the backdrop of raised fists surrounding an open hand. This is a common rally cry denouncing the government’s ongoing campaign of violent repression against activists. Behind the banner was a colorful mural honoring the sacred trilogy of the land, corn and sun. After noting the people, the large banner and the mural, my eyes and attention were drawn to the rest of the protest art that filled the courtyard. After reaching the sunken courtyard and looking to my immediate left, there was a row of windows and an open door leading to a large empty room. On the back wall of the room were two masterfully painted seven-foot tall portraits of Mexican revolutionaries Emiliano Zapata and Ricardo Flores Magón with questions painted next to them such as “What have you said?” “What have you created with your own hands?” “What do you feel when you learn that they have murdered another human being?” “Where are we

walking?” Turning my gaze to the right of the courtyard, I saw another mural, which was an homage to Lorenzo Sampablo Cervantes who was murdered by paramilitaries while guarding one of the movement’s occupied radio stations in 2006 (Figure 6). Panning my gaze further to the right, I noticed a wall covered in political posters such as those announcing movement events and calling for the release of political prisoners (Figure 7). The house was also covered with images stenciled onto the walls with spray-paint depicting youth with Mohawks, former Mexican President Benito Juárez wearing a gas mask, and no shortage of Anarchist and Zapatista symbols (Figure 6). The signs of resistance I was looking for on the streets of Oaxaca had not disappeared; I was simply looking in the wrong places.



Figure 1: Zócalo protest art, 2007. Photo credit: Author.



Figure 2: Whitewashing of zócalo protest art, 2007. Photo credit: Author.



Figure 3: Free political prisoner poster posted on top of political poster found in historic city center 2007. Photo credit: Author.



Figure 4: Federal Preventative Police. Photo credit: [www.serveracruz.com](http://www.serveracruz.com)



Figure 5: Sidewalk view of CASOTA. Photo credit: Google Maps.



Figure 6: CASOTA- Sampablo mural and stenciled images. Photo by author.



Figure 7: Posters in courtyard of CASOTA. Photo by author

## CHAPTER II

### INTRODUCTION: ON THE POLITICS OF FIELDWORK

The authors of the anthology [belong to] a generation full of disillusionment, one that equips itself with cynicism and indifference in order to avoid being cheated again, one that no longer believes in anything because its whole life has passed in fraud. A generation whose country has raised it on a high dosage of unfulfilled promises, each one larger than the previous, like a joke without end.  
Tryno Maldonado (2008:12)

These days it seems that Mexico is a country for which everything hurts, it is sick with corruption, infected by violence, but if one gets close to its heart they hear a beat so energetic that it will make them tremble: that of its youth.  
Elena Poniatowska (2012)

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Both of the above quotes were authored by Mexican writers reflecting on the current generation of youth in Mexico. The first, through a familiar narrative laments, albeit sympathetically, the indifference and cynicism that the current generation has developed. The other celebrates Mexico's youth as the agents of change that the country so desperately needs in its time of crisis. In this dissertation, I seek to address the truth in both commentaries by complicating the former and grounding the latter. In the pages that follow, I offer accounts collected over six years of ethnographic research with youth activists in Oaxaca, Mexico. I began this research in June 2007 and made my last research visit in March 2013. It is my hope that their stories help counter narratives that blame youth for their own marginalization.

In my research an empirical concern with Mexican youth intersects with an analytical concern over how we, as social scientists, conceptualize social movements. In the ethnographic vignette that opened the dissertation, I offer a snapshot of my own

process of grappling with such questions “in the field.”<sup>1</sup> Specifically, in that case I am beginning to question how we understand social movement temporality and how we gauge movement success and failure- *How do we assess when social movements begin and end? What are the parameters for assessing social movement success or failure? When is it too early? When is it fruitful to ask these questions?*

I began conducting fieldwork in 2007, one year after a violent police action against striking teachers in Oaxaca was met by the formation of a popular social movement that took grassroots control of the city for 6 months. This dissertation focuses on the emerging cultures and forms of social movement organizing among urban youth who participated in this social movement. My research begins with the recognition that youth in Mexico, as is the case in many of the recent global uprisings, have injected existing traditions of organizing with a new energy, logic and practices whose aims go far beyond electoral change, thus posing a serious challenge to dominant political regimes as well as to traditional opposition politics.

By focusing on the cultural politics of youth activism, I mean to call attention to the meanings, practices and discourses enacted by actors in opposition to, and as an alternative to, the dominant political culture (Alvarez, et al. 1998). In doing so, I am following a tradition in social movements studies that seeks to decenter the state and the addressing of social movement grievances via mechanisms of state power as the only means of measuring social movement success or impact. As an anthropologist, I seek instead to understand the everyday grassroots practices of marginalized communities as they construct counter-hegemonic political cultures.

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<sup>1</sup> I will address the anthropological construction of a place called “the field” in the last section of this introduction.



With this in mind, my overarching research questions are: 1) *What does the fact that youth political participation is increasingly occurring outside of the official channels of electoral politics and traditional opposition politics tell us about the future of existing political systems?* 2) *How do excluded sectors of society contest their marginalization and redefine politics through organized political actions and everyday practice?* 3) *What happens during the ebbs and flows of social movement activity and what does this tell us about how activism is maintained across time and space?*

### ***Mexican Youth and Youth Studies***

In this study, youth is understood as a social identity and not a biological or demographic category. I understand youth to be a relational, dynamic, and heterogeneous identity (Urteaga 2011), one that in the given context is an overtly political identity that often says as much about one's politics as it does about their age. Thus, in my analysis of youth activism, I break with traditions in sociology and psychology that focus on youth "deviance" or that understand youth as being adulthood's "Other" (Juris and Pleyers 2009). I emphasize this identity in my research because it is one that activists overwhelmingly use to self-identify and one that they deploy in describing their collective political and cultural projects. In addition to identifying as Oaxacan, youth is one of the more salient categories that unites activists in this study across the great range of diversity (race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, religious, political, etc.) which they represent.

This dissertation challenges dominant narratives about Mexican youth and civil society espoused by the media and politicians in the U.S and Mexico. The U.S. narrative

presents a doomsday scenario of chaos and violence that gives another pretense for further militarization of the border with Mexico. In 2009, the Pentagon issued a report concluding that Mexico was at risk of becoming a failed state, which the U.S. media picked up with headlines like “CIA and Pentagon Wonder: Could Mexico Implode?” (Bowman 2009) and “Mexico’s Instability is a Real Problem” (Kurtzman 2009). Further media reports followed proclaiming that “Mexico’s Youth Slips into Drug Violence” (PBS 2011) and the World Bank recently issued a report entitled “Mexico’s Youth: Authors and Victims of Violence” (2013). To be sure, the situation in Mexico is grave and deserves careful attention, but the political implications of the Pentagon and CIA declaring their Southern neighbor a failed state are alarming. The U.S. government’s solution to violence in Mexico has been to further militarize the border and further arm and train the very same Mexican army and police who Human Rights Watch has found guilty of committing “widespread human rights violations...including extrajudicial killings, disappearances and torture.”

The Mexican narrative, at best, blames the current generation of youth for their supposed apathy, and at worst, criminalizes victims of violence. For example, immediately following the massacre of 18 high school students at a birthday party at a family home in Ciudad Juárez, the investigating police claimed to be looking into the victims’ “connections with organized crime and drug trafficking” (Silva 2010). Although none of the victims were found to have any links to organized crime, the idea that victims of violence “must have done something” is widespread.<sup>2</sup> With the increased levels of

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<sup>2</sup> For ethnographic analysis of public discourses that blame victims of violence for their fates, see Yeh’s (2012) case study in Tijuana.

violence in Mexico disproportionately affecting youth,<sup>3</sup> the implications of such narratives are far reaching. Challenging one-dimensional narratives that blame youth for their own marginalization is critical, in part, because global trends point towards the increasing disenfranchisement and criminalization of youth. A recent report by the International Labour Organization (ILO) declared:

Young people have been disproportionately affected by the global crisis that broke out in the autumn of 2008. This trend has exacerbated earlier challenges and there is concern that unless action is taken, the situation of youth will become unsustainable, putting social cohesion at threat. (2010).

In a later report entitled, “Neither working nor studying, the fate for millions of youth worldwide,” the ILO warned of the detachment and disillusionment that has overtaken unemployed youth on a global scale (2012).

The situation for youth in Mexico is especially precarious because they are caught in the middle of a violent war between an increasingly militarized and repressive government and ever-more violent drug cartels and gangs. In addition to being criminalized and victimized, an entire generation of Mexican youth carry with them the stigma of being known as the “*Ninis- ni estudian, ni trabajan*” (they don’t study, they don’t work). According to a recent article by Mexican journalist Ricardo Rocha, of the 35 million youth (age 15-29 in this case) in the country, 7.23 million are *ninis* (2011). In other words, over 21% of Mexico’s 15-29 years olds are unemployed and are not enrolled in school. Roca calls these statistics “only the most visible data of the collective crime

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<sup>3</sup> For example, by the World Bank’s accounts the homicide rate in Mexico nearly tripled from 8.4 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2007 to 23.8 in 2010. For youth this rate more than tripled from 7.8 in 2007 to 25.5 in 2010 (2012:9).

that this country commits against its youth everyday” citing the fact that homicide is the leading cause of death for youth (ibid).

According to the political rhetoric of the past two decades in Mexico, the current generation of youth should be benefiting from the economic opportunity created through neoliberal economic reforms and the political opening signaled by the end of one-party rule over a decade ago. Instead, Mexican youth find themselves more disenfranchised and disillusioned about the current economic and political systems than the generation before them. Moreover, immigration to the U.S. decreased dramatically in the late 2000s- due in large part because of the economic recession and anti-immigrant hostility in the U.S. The importance of immigration as a “safety valve” for the displaced and un/underemployed in Oaxaca, and throughout Mexico, has been well documented. How exactly the latest ebb in Mexico-U.S. migration and increased return migration will impact Mexican public life is uncertain, but my research indicates that one possible result is that Mexican youth are increasingly focusing their efforts on how to construct dignified and sustainable futures in Mexico.

In contrast to narratives like those described above, my dissertation points to an emerging culture of political and social participation among youth whose visions cannot be confined to existing institutions like political parties, labor unions and NGOs. Far from disinterested, many youth in Mexico are taking their futures into their own hands by building collective projects for social change outside the realm of traditional opposition politics. Many of these youth belong to activist networks that identify strongly with notions of autonomy, and can be considered part of what Juris and Pleyers’ (2009) identify as “autonomous youth movements,” which they describe as being:

organised around small, anti-capitalist collectives...alternative media practitioners and others who stress local struggles and collective self-management. Alternative movements reject all forms of hierarchy, stressing independence from parties, unions, NGOs, and representative institutions (62).

Activists in this study emphasize the creation of horizontal economic and social relationships articulated through networks of alternative institutions and spaces. I will expand on activists' own understandings of autonomy at the end of this chapter, however in this space I want to do 2 things: First, I want to signal the centrality that ideas of autonomy play in the political projects of youth in this study, and in doing so clarify that this is not meant to be a representative study of youth activism in general but instead a study of youth activists that strongly identify with notions of collective autonomy (hence the title of the dissertation). Second, in this space I wish to offer a brief sketch of what it is that youth are working for, and against, so that the reader might have a better understanding of the empirical context and theoretical implications of the case study.

In order to conceptualize the political culture Oaxacan youth are constructing, it is important to emphasize the prefigurative nature of their political projects. Activists reject vanguardism and theories of social change premised on the idea that the means justify the ends. Instead, they seek to build or "prefigure" the egalitarian structures and relations that they desire in the present, not after the revolution or after taking power. In other words, the goal and process are inseparable. Through their political projects, activists are enacting and experimenting with responses to John Holloway's provocation (2005), which to paraphrase asks: *How can we struggle against power without adopting the logic of power?* (17).

The activism of youth in this study can be understood in a broad sense to be a critical reaction to neoliberal policies which have created a new class of billionaires in Mexico<sup>4</sup> while leaving most Mexicans to search for precarious wage labor in the country's urban centers or in the United States. Moreover, the logic of neoliberalism that seeks to create self-sufficient atomized individuals is explicitly rejected by youth who emphasize collectivity and community. As we will see in the pages that follow, youth are not just working against social and political fragmentation, but also the physical fragmentation of working-class communities. This fragmentation manifests itself in the urban terrain in Oaxaca, as it does in much of the Global South whereby working-class people inhabit peripheral neighborhoods that are often founded as squatter settlements and lack the most basic services and infrastructure. These settlements are often disconnected from each other as well as from the city center, which has historically been the center of public life.

In the case of urban Oaxaca, these neighborhoods are often settled by migrants from rural, mostly indigenous communities where social relationships and interdependence are the backbone of daily life. The majority of youth in this study are migrants or children of migrants to the city. Along with the social fragmentation experienced by migrants in the city, youth are explicitly reacting against the increasing privatization of public space, which is part-and-parcel of the neoliberal project. Autonomous youth collectives are not waiting for the state or private sector to offer them

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<sup>4</sup> Billionaire communications tycoon Carlos Slim Helú is the most visible of these new Mexican billionaires, but he is by no means alone. In fact, his cousin Alfredo Harp Helú made a fortune in 2001 after selling the largest bank in Mexico, Banamex, to Citigroup ten years after it was privatized.

opportunities or charity- they are experimenting with novel ways to create spaces for collective use and the strengthening of horizontal social relations.

### ***The Anthropology of Social Movements***

As a response to the global social movements which emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, two dominant approaches to the study of social movements emerged: Resource Mobilization theory (herein RM) and New Social Movements theory (herein NSM). Each grew as a result of the historical, political and social milieu of its time and place. RM took shape chiefly in the United States, largely in order to theorize what was occurring with the civil rights movements in the country. RM was a response and challenge to the dominant approaches to collective action at the time in the U.S. which were based on ideas of the irrationality and “mob mentality” of collective behavior (Arendt 1951; Park 1967). In contrast RM, as theorized by some of its main proponents like Charles Tilly (1978), and John McCarthy and Meyer Zald (1977), emphasized the rationality of collective action. For example, by analyzing the decision to join a movement based on a sort of cost-benefit analysis imported from economics. RM approaches focused on the formal organizational manifestation of mobilizing processes, which was useful for examining the internal dynamics of movements. Critics, however, were quick to point out that such approaches largely ignore the cultural aspects of movements (Alvarez et al 1998) and place the tools for social change at the abstract structural level (i.e. large-scale political or economic reform) and hence out of the reach of activists (Kaminski 2008).

As a response to these and other critiques, RM scholars developed new models such as the Political Opportunity Structures and Political Process models. These models

merged an emphasis on structure with attention to the formation of collective identities and discourses (McAdam 1999; McAdam et al 1996). Scholars build on some of the more useful concepts developed under the RM approach, such as the idea that movements have certain “repertoires of contention” or an established set of practices based on previous experience and political opportunities (Tilly 1978). Political Opportunity Structures and Political Process models offer valuable tools for social movements scholars such as “framing” and “mobilizing structures,” which allow us to conceptualize how activists construct meaning, sentiments and definitions (McAdam et al 1996) and how formal and informal forms of organizing shape collective action (Tarrow 1998). I will employ these concepts in describing, for example, how networks of punk and hip-hop youth in Oaxaca served as mobilizing structures during the social movement of 2006.

While scholars in the U.S. were developing their RM approach, their counterparts in Europe were developing NSM.<sup>5</sup> This approach developed as a critique of the Orthodox Marxism that dominated social movement analysis in Europe. This signaled an attempt to understand the apparent shift in European social movements, from those organized around class-based conflict to identity-based movements. The scholarship of Alain Touraine (1985), Alberto Melucci (1989), and Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985) was important in challenging the economic determinism of Orthodox Marxism by decentering class struggle as *the* chief antagonism in society and the industrial proletariat as *the* main actor in revolutionary history. Touraine’s work (1985), for example, was seminal in recognizing that postindustrial capitalism created new social cleavages beyond the factory floor. Laclau and Mouffe (1985) argued for the open nature of the social and

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<sup>5</sup> For the purposes of our discussion I offer a simplified sketch of RM and NSM; For a more in-depth overview see Canel (1997) and Edelman (2001).



of identities, hence highlighting the multiplicity of identities and motivations present in any given social movement. Such an understanding is crucial for framing a broad-based movement like the Oaxacan social movement of 2006, where any attempt to impose a unified category of identification for participants would gloss over very real differences and diversity of experience. In this theoretical tradition, sometimes referred to as “post-class,” class consciousness does not disappear but instead becomes one of many forms of identification for social movements and for movement activists. Critics of NSM studies argue that this model overstates the discontinuity between “new” and “old” social movement actors (Canel 1997).

Sonia Alvarez, Evelina Dagnino and Arturo Escobar (1998) highlight how movements engage in struggles over the very definition of cultural, social and political meanings, such as who is afforded full citizenship rights and what form and degree of participation is to be considered democratic. Alvarez, Dagnino and Escobar insist that these struggles over meaning are political processes and must be considered as such. While RM privileges the role that institutions play in shaping social movements vis-à-vis opportunities, available resources, and consequences of action and inaction, a cultural politics approach like that outlined by Alvarez, Dagnino and Escobar emphasizes how social movements are involved in transforming public discourses and ideologies about the social, cultural and political.

By focusing on the cultural politics of youth activism, I mean to call attention to the meanings and practices enacted by young people in opposition to, and as an alternative to, the dominant political culture of electoral politics in Mexico. In doing so, I am following largely in the NSM tradition by decentering the state and the addressing of

grievances via mechanisms of state power as the principle means of measuring social movement success or impact. I combine a focus on “submerged” or “everyday” forms of resistance (Melucci 1989; Scott 1990) with analysis of direct-actions and mass mobilizations to try and move beyond a focus on social movement emergence and decline by thinking about how the organizing power of social movements is maintained across time and space. Here I find the “meshwork” concept as applied by Escobar (2008) and the notion of “social movement spillover” as developed by Meyer and Whittier (1994) especially useful. Spillover is a concept that addresses the ways in which social movements influence each other and overlap, thus helping counter the tendency of viewing movements as discrete units.<sup>6</sup> Meshwork is a concept that helps frame the diverse overlapping networks found within a given movement, which I develop further in the next chapter. Importantly, the meshwork when employed in conjunction with a Foucauldian understanding of power (1979; 1990), allows us trace the ways in which power and resistance circulate through decentralized webs. Such a dynamic understanding of power and resistance helps us avoid the “romance of resistance” (Abu-Lughod 1990) whereby studies of resistance tend to lose focus of the dialectic of power and resistance.

I argue that focusing primarily on social movement emergence and decline misses a great deal of the everyday work that is done to sustain social movement energy through the inevitable ebbs and flows of social movement life. Moreover, I argue that assessing movement success or failure based purely on their ability to impact the state is too narrow a framework for understanding how movements impact political cultures. My research

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<sup>6</sup> In her chapter in the edited volume, *Feminist Coalitions* (2008), Stephanie Gilmore offers a poignant critic of viewing movements as discrete units.

suggests that focusing on the intersection of a politics of space and cultural production can provide a window into what happens at the everyday level of social movements as well as their impact on political cultures.

### ***Youth and the Politics of Public Space***

The anthropological and related literature on space and place has highlighted the social, political, discursive and economic dynamics involved in the gendering (Massey 1994), racialization (Page and Thomas 1994), commodification (Harvey 2006) and deterritorialization (Appadurai 1996) of public space as well as in the spatialization of culture (Low 2000) and power (Foucault 1979). Using the case of youth activism in Oaxaca, I build on these theoretical insights through ethnographic exploration of how youth challenge the hegemonic and exclusionary politics of public place and space-making through the creation of social movement spaces, direct actions and highly visible cultural production.

The political economy of public space literature highlights how public space is constructed in the service of capitalist and state interests, often at the expense and exclusion of popular interests (Harvey 2006, Sassen 2000). An instance of such a ‘spatial economy’ occurs when state and capitalist interests collude to gentrify a city, transforming urban spaces such as Manhattan and San Francisco’s Mission and Fillmore Districts from working-class, immigrant and ethnic minority neighborhoods to upscale, increasingly white, shopping and living areas. Gramscian approaches highlight how public space is produced and policed through a complex web of cultural and material processes (Joseph and Nugent 1994) such as the creation of ‘pseudo-public spaces’ that

are maintained through a semiotics of exclusion, including militarization, private security and surveillance meant to keep “undesirable” people out (Davis 1990). Restaurateurs, travel agencies and hotel owners have been trying to convert the zócalo (main plaza) in Oaxaca, and much of the historic downtown area, into such ‘pseudo-public spaces.’ With the help of local government and police, areas where street vendors once dominated are being remade into tourist spaces with expensive stores and restaurants that most Oaxacans cannot afford. Setha Low’s work on the plaza in Costa Rican cities highlights the centrality of these public space in the social, political and cultural lives of Latin American cities (2000).

While the ethnographic record is limited, theorists acknowledge that place is experienced, grounded and connected to everyday life (Dirlik 2001, Escobar 2001) while place-making involves “embodied practices that shape identities and enable resistance” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997:6). Scholars speak of the “double sense of urban politics of space” whereby social movements politicize urban spaces through their struggle over access, control, representation and meaning such that urban space becomes both the object and medium of political agency (Tonkiss 2005:64). What most approaches to the politics of space lack is ethnographically grounded analysis of how the excluded contest and redefine public space at the level of everyday practices.

This dissertation addresses this oversight by examining how youth create counter-hegemonic projects that reconfigure public space through networks of resistance composed of physically and symbolically occupied public space and autonomous social movement spaces. I argue that social movements, and the political cultures they help create, are far more sustainable if movements are able to create a network of what

Lefebvre called *counter-spaces* (1991). Borrowing from Lefebvre, I define counter-spaces as spatial projects produced through the political imagination and practice of social movements as an alternative to the spaces created by the dominant system. Such spaces provide cracks in the totalizing logic of the capitalist city which seeks to privatize and commodify the public. Counter-spaces openly challenging the political and capitalist classes ownership and control of the city's public spaces and public life through practices of collective use such as holding political rallies or cultural events in the *zócalo*. Counter-spaces do not exist completely outside of dominant space. Rather, counter-space is a project, a continual process of contestation that is never complete. Much like hegemony is a dominant project that is always contested and negotiated, dominant space is never complete. Its incomplete nature is exposed and expanded through projects of counter-space, which exist in direct opposition to the strategies and power relations operating in dominant space.

### ***Methodology***

This dissertation builds on material I have collected over a 23-month period of fieldwork in Oaxaca dating back to 2007. My Master's paper entitled, "Articulating Social Networks in a Mexican Social Movement: The Case of the APPO in Oaxaca" traced the decades long genealogies of thick, overlapping histories of indigenous, peasant, labor, women's, student and urban neighborhood organizing in the state that coalesced in 2006 with the formation of the APPO. The bulk of fieldwork, however, was conducted while I was living in Oaxaca between October 2009-February 2011.

I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 28 activists and artists between the ages of 17-32, most falling in the 18-28 range, in order to understand how their biographies shaped their political norms, visions and identities. Additionally, I interviewed 10 activists, teachers, academics and local residents between the ages of 38-65 to see how older generations understood the politics of the younger generation and whether or not it resonated with their own experiences. Of the 38 interviewees, 26 were men and 12 were woman. The greatest reason for the disproportionate number of men is that of the 10 graffiti artists I interviewed, all were men. Although there are woman graffiti artists in Oaxaca, the scene is overwhelmingly dominated by men. The only woman who belonged to any of the graffiti collectives I worked with was a photographer and I was not able to meet her since she no longer lived in Oaxaca nor belonged to the collective at the time of my fieldwork. Of the 28 youth I interviewed, 19 were migrants or children of migrants to the city from rural, mostly indigenous communities; 6 were born and raised in Oaxaca City; and 3 continued to live in the towns outside of the city where they were born and raised. Of those 25 that lived in the city, the vast majority of them (22) lived in working-class neighborhoods, known as *colonias* or *barrios*, located along the outskirts of the city (see Figure 8).

At the time of our interviews, the youth participated in various overlapping political and cultural collectives and spaces. The two main political collectives were Voces Oaxaqueñas Construyendo Autonomía y Libertad or VOCAL (Oaxacan Voices Constructing Autonomy and Liberty) and Casa Autónoma Solidaria Oaxaqueña de Trabajo Autogestivo or CASOTA (Autonomous Oaxacan Solidarity House for Self-Managed Work ). The collectives were created in 2007 and 2008, respectively, with



The process of transcription began while living in Oaxaca but the majority of transcription occurred once I returned to Oregon. Upon transcribing interviews, I coded them in order to detect patterns, themes and particularities in participants' experiences. While in Oaxaca, I conducted participant observation of social movement events and in activist spaces, including 18 mass mobilizations, 7 direct-actions, 16 activist meetings, 10 workshops, 10 cultural events, and dozens of social gatherings with activists where I was able to witness first-hand the complex processes involved in the emerging politics of youth activists, including how they collectively analyze, make decisions, and handle internal differences. I also spent a great deal of time researching the social networking technologies used by activists, primarily through blogs, Facebook, and in some cases Twitter. I collected a large amount of data including exchanges between activists working through strategic and ideological differences, allowing me to visualize how their activism mirrors the networking logic of the technology they use (e.g. horizontal, directly democratic, heterogeneous).<sup>7</sup> Finally, I collected a great deal of popularly produced materials documenting the APPO and the subsequent political projects of autonomous youth activists including video, audio, texts and visual products. The data collected through these various sources allowed me to benefit from multiple entry points and perspectives into the political culture being experimented with by youth activists in Oaxaca.

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<sup>7</sup> See Juris 2008 for more on the relationship between networking technologies and activism.



### *Subjectivity and Positionality of the Researcher*

Before continuing any further, I believe it necessary to position myself in relation to this research project and explain how the project was born. Critical feminist scholars have long recognized the need for researchers to take their own subjectivities and positionalities into account (Code 1993; Haraway 1988; Visweswaran 1994). This includes complicating ideas about scholarly objectivity and rethinking the distance and relationship between ‘researcher’ and ‘subject,’ between the world of the researcher and ‘the field’ (Fernandes 2010; Stephen 2002). An important aspect of such efforts is both humanizing those we work with by highlighting their agency as they strive to live their lives with dignity, as well as recognizing the power dynamics and privilege involved in conducting ethnographic research and writing, as we travel between social locations and in the case of researchers who reproduce the North-South trope, that we take seriously the privilege of our “First World” affiliations and passports. To begin this process I briefly turn the ethnographic gaze on myself by describing how I came to this project.

Like many 1.5-generation children (Gonzales-Berry and Mendoza 2010), my sister and I grew up mostly in the U.S. after immigrating as young children. But unlike my sister, I was born in the United States and taken back to Mexico as an infant. This meant that I was a citizen of both countries while my sister was considered an alien on U.S. soil. Growing up in the United States during the 1980s and 90s, however, we grew up with the privilege of frequent trips back to Mexico. Crossing the U.S.-Mexico border in those days was not the militarized often dehumanizing production that it is today. Once in Mexico, we saw both the beauty whose absence our parents lamented while in the

U.S., and the conditions that forced our parents to look for work in *el gabacho* (slang for the U.S.).

My father studied at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) in the late 1960s, where he was involved in the student movement of 1968. My grandfather, the illegitimate son of a Zapatista general, was a career military officer from Michoacán who had recently retired after serving as a presidential guard. He sympathized with the student movement and my father's involvement, as the story goes, but on October 2, 1968 he ordered my father not to attend the protests and to tell his friends to stay home that afternoon. It is uncertain what exactly my grandfather knew, but the government massacre of dozens, if not hundreds, of protesters crushed any idealism my father had about social change in Mexico. After migrating to the U.S. 15 years later, he maintained a profound distrust towards the Mexican government. He would often criticize the corruption and lack of democracy in Mexico but curiously would be the first to defend it when *gringos* would talk about the corruption of the Mexican political system. He would argue that yes, Mexican politicians were corrupt and self-serving, but at least everyone knew where they stood. He maintained that U.S. politicians, on the other hand, were just as corrupt, but on top of that they were hypocrites who hid behind the veil of democracy.

I grew up listening to my father's late night debates in Mexico City with my uncles and their younger sister Leti (who was never one to let the older men have the last word) in smoke filled, alcohol laced living rooms. After my father's passing in 2010, my mother confessed that she always dreaded visiting his family in Mexico City because of the all night debates which were far too heavy on testosterone, liquor, and tobacco for her taste. I had a hard time keeping up with the content of these debates, but I remember their

arguments about the Trato de Libre Comercio, as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) is known in Mexico. I remember one of my uncles calling it a scam by the *yanquis* (Yankees or the United States) to exploit Mexican labor and take possession of Mexico's vast natural resources. He was certain that those Mexican politicians who were selling the promise of "free market" capitalism were paid to do so by *capitalistas yanquis*. Always the contrarian, my father argued in favor of NAFTA because now my aunts in Sonora could find work in maquiladoras (which they did) and my uncle in Mexico City would be able to, at least theoretically, trade in his *bocho* (Volkswagen Beetle) for a Ford (which he did not).

On January 1, 1994, the date NAFTA officially went into effect, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN; often referred to simply as the Zapatistas) launched their armed struggle against the Mexican government. The multiethnic indigenous army took over five county seats in Chiapas and denounced neoliberal reforms, particularly the dismantling of agrarian land reforms<sup>8</sup> ahead of NAFTA, as being a death sentence for indigenous communities in Mexico. My father, like many Mexicans of his generation, was captivated by the Zapatistas, reading any Spanish language book he could get his hands on that dealt with the Zapatistas or their charismatic spokesperson, el Subcomandante Marcos. He seemingly did not see the contradiction, however, in simultaneously celebrating the hope represented by the EZLN and NAFTA. The Zapatistas seemed the antidote for decades of cynicism he (and many others) held about social change in Mexico, a cynicism that was layered on top of the despair and tragedy of

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<sup>8</sup> The redistribution of land and creation communally held land through the system of *ejidos* is the most enduring legacy of the Mexican Revolution, one that is tied specifically to Emiliano Zapata who is one of the most beloved historical figures in Mexico (See Stephen 2002).

1968. Conversely, NAFTA seemed for him to signal an important step in the “democratizing” of Mexican politics by weakening the government’s monopoly over sectors such as telecommunications and the banking industry.

I was fourteen years old in 1994, two years shy of dropping out of high school and certainly not what you could call an avid reader or follower of politics. I didn’t realize the impacts that the Zapatista uprising and NAFTA would have on millions of people’s lives, let alone the way that these two events would strongly influence the paths I would follow in life. At the age of sixteen, I was the last in a long line of friends to abandon school in favor of the low-wage workforce. Although my parents made it clear that they had not given up everything they knew for their eldest son to be a career dishwasher, a combination of economic pressure, peer pressure and alienation from the public school system led me to dropout. Eventually, however, I became disillusioned about the racial politics at work and my long-term possibilities. While working food service and construction jobs, I earned my G.E.D. and enrolled part-time at a local community college. Eventually, I transferred to the University of South Florida, where I earned my undergraduate degree in anthropology. While I didn’t focus on the Zapatistas or social movements in school, I dug up my father’s old books and soon found myself captivated by the movement in Chiapas.

After graduating from USF, I worked in a warehouse for a year where I saved up the money necessary to fund a trip to Chiapas in order to volunteer for 2 months in Zapatista communities as a human rights observer through Global Exchange and the Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Bartolomé de las Casas. When applying to graduate programs soon after my time in Chiapas, I was forced to think more concretely about

what my research interests would be. My interest in the Zapatistas and the effects of neoliberalism in Latin America led me to focus on the study of social movements. The summer before I was to begin my graduate program, a new social movement emerged in Oaxaca, the neighboring state to the west of Chiapas. Through YouTube, Internet radio stations and alternative media sources like Democracy Now! and Indymedia, images and audio of the movement in Oaxaca captured the revolutionary imagination of people all over the globe, including myself.

Once I began my graduate program at the University of Oregon, I continued to follow the social movement and enjoyed regular conversations with my advisor who had been working in Oaxaca for many years and had been in Oaxaca that summer during the emergence of the movement. My interest in social movements, the emergence of the movement in Oaxaca, and my advisor's experience in the area made my decision to study the Oaxacan social movement almost a forgone conclusion. I arrived in Oaxaca for the first time in the summer of 2007 where I conducted fieldwork that was compiled in my Master's thesis focusing on alliance building within the movement. I arrived in Oaxaca with my own research agenda, affiliation with a U.S. university, and both my U.S. and Mexican passports. That summer I interviewed activists, taxi drivers, retired nurses, return migrants, urban youth and construction workers. As a light-skinned, university educated, dual citizen, male researcher working in Southern Mexico I grappled with a degree of privilege I had never experienced before.

Over the six years since my initial visit in 2007, I have developed many friendships with people in Oaxaca, including many whose voices and stories fill the pages that follow. While I have been welcomed into people's homes, lives, political projects,

and trusted with sensitive and highly personal information, it is important that I not gloss over my relative power and privilege. As a Chicano graduate student working with Mexican youth, many of whom are somewhere between my younger brother and I in age, I was viewed quite differently by those youth than a professor from the U.S. In some instances this translated into greater access to the internal dynamics of close-knit political and cultural collectives. I discovered that there can be a certain amount of social capital that comes with being a young Chicano working with youth activists in Mexico- some wanted to know more about the history of the Chicano Movement and the Black Panthers, while others wanted to talk about my tattoos, my favorite rappers or whether or not I had seen the work of such and such graffiti artist.

My ability to speak to these issues from my particular social and political location gave me a degree of access that others might not have. With this access and trust also comes a lot of responsibility. I have had to make a lot of decisions about what internal conflicts to share with readers and which to remain silent about. I also had to make decisions about which groups to try and work with and which not to approach. In the years that had passed since the height of social movement mobilization and state repression, groups had splintered and lines were drawn in the sand. Activists accused each other of being government moles, outside provocateurs, and self-serving opportunists. In this context, I could not have gained the trust of the groups I worked with had I been simultaneously trying to establish a relationship with a “rival” collective. Moreover, once I had established trust with certain collectives, I became associated with them, having been repeatedly seen at mobilizations and other events with them. I could not very well go to a rival group and expect them to trust me.

During my first 2 summers of fieldwork in Oaxaca, I learned plenty about activists *tirando línea* (reciting the organization's official discourse), and while there is certainly a great deal to be learned by analyzing the official discourse of political organizations, I felt more compelled to try and gain deeper insights into the culture of organizing emerging among youth collectives and I quickly learned that in order to gain any semblance of this, I was going to have to "pick sides" in what was a contentious political landscape. My interest was less about the particularities of the allegations being leveled, and more about the political projects being carried out and to what extent these antagonisms prevented movement building. In the dissertation that follows, I analyze how on some occasions the politics of youth collectives allows them to work through ideological differences with other groups where they essentially "agree to disagree" and come together for movement mobilizations and cultural events. Conversely, I also explore the tensions and frictions involved in such a loose and non-hierarchical activism and the possibilities that might exist if these groups were to spend less energy politicking, set egos aside, and build on the physical togetherness of mobilizations in creating their political projects.

All of this is not to say that based solely on my age and my Mexican roots I was allowed access or that I was *forced* to make these alliances, rather it was in part because of these factors that I was *able* to make the political and methodological decision to conduct in-depth fieldwork with specific collectives (and not others) as opposed to interviewing a large number of "informants" that I had not developed personal connections with. I am not declaring one approach more "authentic" or "correct" but I do believe that what the approach I employ here lacks in breadth, it more than compensates

for in depth, nuance and complexity. For example, my ability to speak to the internal and inter-group dynamics during a tense direct-action allows me to analyze how an emerging political culture is being constructed in practice, with all of its imperfections and possibilities.<sup>9</sup> Without trust that has been gained over years, I would not have been allowed to get close enough to witness such dynamics.

My decisions as to which groups to work with stemmed in part from practical concerns, such as already having relationships with members of these networks from previous research in Oaxaca. The trust that comes with having established relationships within social movements is crucial in contexts where mistrust is widespread. In Oaxaca this mistrust was due in large part to ongoing campaigns of government repression, infiltration and cooptation. Moreover, the fact that I had stayed in touch with people between trips and began to establish a regular presence in Oaxaca helped ease concerns that many Oaxacans have about anthropologists and other researchers who have a long history of showing up, collecting data, and then disappearing. Joanne Rappaport (2005) describes this dynamic in her collaborative ethnography with indigenous intellectuals and activists in Colombia, which she captures with the distinction many anthropologists encounter between being viewed as an *antropóloga* (anthropologist) versus an *antropófaga* (cannibal). Not wanting to be viewed as a cannibal, I take very seriously the trust and rapport I have been building and am not willing to sacrifice it in order to “get in” with groups that are at odds with the ones I have been working with for several years.

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<sup>9</sup> See Chapter VII for examples of this.



I made the decision to try and work with two political collectives- VOCAL and CASOTA- in part, because of their visibility as the most active youth-run collectives and spaces at the time of my fieldwork, but also because I was able to establish trust with members of these collectives based in part on mutual relationships that carried considerable weight. While little had been written about these collectives outside of interviews with a few of the more visible activists, street art in Oaxaca was the one area where youth garnered considerable attention both in the popular media and academic texts. Images of the street art that dramatically covered the city during 2006 have circulated globally in the years since 2006 and have given rise to a celebrity among certain street art collectives in Oaxaca. Street artists from certain collectives have since been invited to travel and exhibit their work in galleries and museums all over the world.

Three collectives whose work stood out when I arrived in 2007 were ASARO (Assembly of Revolutionary Artists of Oaxaca)<sup>10</sup>, Lapiztola<sup>11</sup> and Arte Jaguar. They all stood out because their work appealed to me aesthetically, had overtly political and social content, and was highly visible throughout the city. When I arrived for my dissertation fieldwork in 2009, I attended a roundtable discussion about the role of art in the social movement of 2006. The three collectives mentioned above were represented. I found the commentary by a member of Arte Jaguar particularly compelling. He spoke about his collective's art in such a way that community, space, place and class trumped concerns

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<sup>10</sup> For more on ASARO see Arenas 2011; Gibler 2009; Guzman Cuevas 2009; Lache Bolaños 2009; Stephen 2013.

<sup>11</sup> La Piztola is a collective made up of two graphic designers whose urban art installations are created by using large layered stencil work that creates polished highly graphic images. The name of the collective is a clever play on words, fusing the words 'lápiz' (pencil) and 'pistola' (gun).

about design, genre, style, or political rhetoric for that matter. He emphasized the importance of making one's work available in diverse public spaces where working class Oaxacans and rural communities could appreciate the work and not primarily spaces of privilege (i.e. Historic city center, museums, galleries and boutiques). My decision to try and work with artists associated Arte Jaguar stemmed in part from the seeming contradiction between the visibility of their art and the relative scarcity of academic and media attention to the collective at the time, in addition to my scholarly interest in how members of the collective understood the politics involved in their art production.

Like Victor Rios (2011) working with criminalized Black and Latino youth in Oakland, I feel that along with the trust I was able to gain with the young people in my study comes the obligation to give back, in part, by actively engaging in their lives. Part of this means focusing on routine everyday occurrences instead of sensationalizing extreme occurrences and also not privileging leaders by instead focusing on regular people living life and striving for dignity. For me this meant spending extended periods of time with youth before asking for interviews, and getting to know them as people not objects of study.

Finally, I should mention that the same markers that let to greater access among certain groups in Oaxaca, were read very differently by others. Conducting my research in Southern Mexico at a time when return migration, Central American migration through Mexico, and the sometimes true, often exaggerated stories about transnational gangs and drug cartels meant that my appearance was often misinterpreted. For example, after conducting an interview in a town outside of the city, the young man I just interviewed and I went to the corner store to buy some beer and tortillas. On our way to the store

another young man approached us. Seeing my baldhead, tattooed forearms and dark sunglasses he immediately came up to me and started asking me what set I was from. He mistook me for someone like him- a return migrant who had joined a gang while in the U.S. On another occasion an older woman came up to me on a park bench and began scolding me for being a “bad kid,” for my tattoos and for my baldhead. She asked me, “Don’t you know we don’t want you like this, we want you to be good kids.” Depending on who I was with and where we were, I was mistaken for a return migrant or Central American gang member or a member of a drug cartel from Northern Mexico. Instances like this often occurred when leaving the city such that the relative privilege I experienced in Southern Mexico coexisted alongside the same type of racial profiling I grew up with in the U.S.

### ***Terminology and Concepts***

Below I offer a brief description of some of the key concepts or terms that are used frequently in the pages that follow. Some are words in Spanish that I chose not to translate because I felt part of the meaning would be lost. Others are concepts that I describe here in order to avoid misinterpretations of how they are being used in the context of this study.

*Activism*- Goodwin and Jasper define activism as “movement participation that entails leadership activity, organizing, conscious concern about the direction of the movement and conscious long-term commitment of time and resources and energy to the movement” (2004:143). I find this definition a bit narrow in terms of the authors’

emphasis on leadership activity and duration of activity. I like the emphasis on the conscious concern and commitment but I find that a definition of activism needs to recognize diverse forms of participation and different ways of conceiving of ones relation to the movement. I actually prefer the World English Dictionary's definition: Activism, *noun*, 1) a policy of taking direct action to achieve an end, especially a political or social one, 2) the doctrine or practice of vigorous action or involvement as a means of achieving political or other goals, sometimes by demonstrations, protests, etc.

*Autonomy*- The concept of autonomy is foundational to many of the political projects I study here. Autonomy can be understood in diverse ways, ranging from liberal notions of the rights of the individual (i.e. Kant's moral philosophy) to collective rights of self-determination (i.e. indigenous autonomy). Geographer Paul Chatterton understands autonomy as: "a deep desire to expand collective capacity for self-government" (2010:899). This definition addresses three important aspects of autonomy as it is used by the youth activists in this study: 1) Chatterton focuses on the collective practice of autonomy, 2) The above definition includes desire, which signals the human emotion involved in struggles for autonomy, as opposed to an exclusive focus on ideology or materialism; and 3) The idea of 'expanding' reminds us that the struggle for autonomy is always a process, never a completed act. I believe this definition resonates with activists' own understandings of autonomy although what is missing are the two main reference points for how Oaxacan youth imagine autonomy: 1) the model of indigenous autonomy practiced in Zapatista base communities in Chiapas whereby they have unilaterally established their own governing structures independent of the Mexican government, 2)

the model of *usos y costumbres* (indigenous customary law and traditions) practiced in 418 of the 570 municipalities in Oaxaca whereby the state government recognizes indigenous communities right to communal self-governance.<sup>12</sup> To get an idea of how youth understand their autonomous projects, I turn to the words of a VOCAL activist named Daniel. He defined autonomy to me as follows:

I see autonomy as that capacity or ability to make the necessary decisions that guide life in our communities. That within ourselves exists the capacity to analyze, reflect, debate and decide what needs to be done. That it not be external factors telling us what needs to be done in order to live well as they define it- be they government, political party, or business.

*Banda*- a word used repeatedly by many of the youth in my study to refer to themselves, their peers and sometimes to people in general. This word could be loosely translated into “homies,” or “homeboys” in some contexts but it does not have the same association with hip-hop culture. The word is often translated as “gang,” but that is not the usage here. In the context used here, *banda* tends to refer more broadly to youth from popular neighborhoods or specifically to the speaker’s group of friends. For this reason I choose to retain the original *banda* in my translations of interviews.

*Barrio* or *colonia*- these two terms are used interchangeably to refer to working-class neighborhoods in Oaxaca.

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<sup>12</sup> Tied to this is the concept of *comunalidad* described below.

*Cultural politics*: the process enacted when actors with different sets of cultural meanings and practices come into conflict with one another (Alvarez et al 1998:9). This approach to politics and culture recognizes that meanings define and redefine power such that when actors seek to redefine dominant meanings, they are engaged in political processes.

*Comunalidad*- this concept was developed by indigenous Oaxacan intellectuals Jaime Martínez Luna and Floriberto Diaz in 1970s as a way of thinking about indigenous communal life in the region.<sup>13</sup> *Comunalidad* is based primarily on the four pillars of communal life: 1) communal authority via the *asamblea* (communal assembly) and the cargo system of alternating public service; 2) communal territory; 3) communal enjoyment via traditional fiestas; and 4) communal work via the *tequio*.

*El pueblo*- literally translates to “the people” or “the town” depending on context. El pueblo as people in this study use it can be used to mean “the nation” (*El pueblo Mexicano* or even *el pueblo Oaxaqueño*), a populist “the people,” or “an indigenous community.”

*Political culture*: the social and historical construction in any given society of what counts as political (Alvarez et al 1998:6). The cultural politics of social movements challenge the dominant political culture.

*Social movement*- Sidney Tarrow defines social movements as collective challenges, based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites,

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<sup>13</sup> See Martínez Luna (2010) and Robles Hernández and Cardoso Jiménez (2007).

opponents and authorities” (1998:9) Important in Tarrow’s understanding of social movements is the fact that elsewhere he specifically distinguishes them from political parties and advocacy groups.

## CHAPTER III

### THE SOCIAL MOVEMENT OF 2006 AND AN OVERVIEW OF THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL LANDSCAPE IN OAXACA

#### *Introduction*

In order to appreciate the importance of rethinking social movement temporality and how we assess social movements' cultural impacts vis-à-vis emergent political cultures and alternative institutions, it is important first to understand the events leading up to the formation of the popular social movement that took grassroots control of the capital city of Oaxaca and several other municipalities for six months in late 2006. This chapter will serve this purpose, by outlining the social and political context surrounding the social movement of 2006, as well as providing a framework for conceptualizing the movement and important events that occurred during the height of the movement's power. I will focus more specifically on spaces of youth participation during 2006 in the Chapter IV.

#### *Empirical Setting*

Oaxaca is a mostly rural state in Southern Mexico (Figure 9 and 10), rich in natural resources and ethnic diversity. It is home to 16 indigenous groups, each with its own language and culture, making it both the most diverse state in Mexico and home to the most indigenous language speakers in the country. The indigenous communal assembly is officially recognized as the decision-making structure in 418 of the 571 municipalities in



the state, meaning that governance through political parties and electoral politics takes place in a minority of municipalities.



Figure 9: Map of Mexico with Oaxaca in Green. Photo credit: Picktrail



Figure 10: Map of Oaxaca with Oaxaca City in Yellow. Photo credit: Secretaria de Comunicaciones y Transportes.

The state has long been a cultural hub, attracting artists and tourists from around the world as well as being home to world-renowned artists such as painter Francisco Toledo and the late Rodolfo Morales. This rich ethnic and cultural landscape is complemented by Oaxaca's biodiversity and geopolitical importance- southeastern Oaxaca is located in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, which represents the shortest distance between the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Ocean. The isthmus has been an important site for interoceanic trade dating back to the times of the Spanish Colonialism. More recently, the Isthmus of Tehuantepec has been targeted by international capital for its natural resources, including wind energy which is converted into wind power. However, this great natural and ethnic wealth stand in stark contrast to the socioeconomic reality of most Oaxacans who live in a state that regularly ranks among the lowest Human Development Index (HDI) and the highest rates of infant and maternal mortality, and domestic violence in the nation.

It is important to recognize that the contradiction between the state's wealth and the poverty of (the majority of) its people is part-and-parcel of a long and complex history of conquest, colonialism, *caciquismo*<sup>14</sup> and racism. When seeking to place Oaxaca in its regional, national and international context, it is useful to consider the notion of *coloniality*, whereby the rigid system of colonial hierarchies that proclaims the ethnic, racial and cognitive superiority of the colonizer is perpetuated even in the "post" colonial moment (Mignolo 2000; Quijano 2000). In the case of Oaxaca and the Mexican South more generally, coloniality has (re)produced the region in the Mexican national

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<sup>14</sup> *Caciquismo* is a form of political clientelism practiced in Latin America where a local political boss dominates local affairs often through authoritarianism and as a proxy for regional or national political elites

imaginary as part of the backwards *Indianness* of the uncivilized past, effectively “Othering” the south and blaming its people for their own poverty and marginalization (Chassen-López 2004).

While the Mexican government has long neglected Oaxaca and the majority of its inhabitants, a national and global shift towards neoliberal economic reforms has exacerbated the long-standing social and economic despair in the state. As part of the economic restructuring adopted by the Mexican government in the 1980s and 90s, the neoliberal state has abandoned the countryside, gouging subsidies and other state supports for small and medium scale agriculture while allowing subsidized U.S. crops to flood the market. This shift has been devastating to the large percentage of Oaxacans who have long counted on some combination of subsistence farming and small-scale commercial agriculture (e.g. coffee, corn, beans). The state and investors have focused instead on “the industry without chimneys,” as one interviewee referred to tourism. The tourism industry centers around the commodification of Oaxaca’s cultural diversity vis-à-vis marketing of ethnic festivals, textiles, crafts, etc. The state also possesses beautiful and relatively undeveloped beaches, important and easily accessible archaeological ruins, and the Historic Centre of the capital city, also named Oaxaca, has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. According to UNESCO 1,200 historic monuments line the streets of Oaxaca City to “create a harmonious cityscape, and reconstitute the image of a former colonial city whose monumental aspect has been kept intact” (UNESCO N.d.).

Additionally, after repeated failed attempts by the Mexican government in the early 2000s to implement Plan-Puebla-Panama (PPP), a regional development project

that emphasized extractive resource projects and cash cropping for export. PPP was to connect Central and Southern Mexico with Central America in order to create a “development corridor,” and has been repackaged and sold to investors and international development agencies as Plan Mesoamerica. Despite the name change, the project maintains its emphasis on neoliberal development based on foreign investment, privatization and extraction of natural resources. In Oaxaca, international capital is being invested in infrastructure such as highways and development projects such as wind power and other extractive industries throughout the state such as mining. These plans have been met by protests as local communities have organized to resist the entry of multinational firms. For example in the Zapotec town of San José del Progreso the community has been trying to force a Canadian mining firm, Fortuna Silver, to leave their town where the company recently constructed a silver mine. As with tourism the economic gains from such projects are funneled upward and outward, with the majority of Oaxacans remaining in poverty and nonrenewable natural resources being exhausted.

As a result of this shift in economic philosophy, regional elites with holdings in the tourism and development-related industries have benefited the most, while the large percentage of Oaxacans who have long counted on some combination of subsistence farming and small-scale commercial agriculture are worse off now than they were ten years ago. The resulting patterns of migration to urban centers and national and international immigration are far from unique to Oaxaca, although Oaxaca does represent one of the Mexican states with the highest number of out-migration over the past few decades.<sup>15</sup> Oaxacan civil society has not passively accepted these terms of economic

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<sup>15</sup> See Cohen 2004, Kearney 1996, and Stephen 2007a for more on Oaxacan migration.

“development,” however, as Oaxaca has seen a proliferation of grassroots, indigenous, women’s, peasant, urban, youth, student and labor organizing. Notable among these have been struggles to democratize labor unions (Cook 1996; Zafra et al. 2002), the right to indigenous self-determination and control over local development (Campbell 1994; Howe 2011; Rubin 1997), access to education (Rénique 2007; Zafra, et al. 2002) as well as the development of community and alternative media (Stephen 2013; Zires 2009). These organizing efforts by civil society have been met by increasingly authoritarian state and national regimes that enforce unpopular policies and repress dissenting voices. Especially important when considering the social movement of 2006 is the fact that - political violence and political arrests in Oaxaca were widespread under then governor Ulises Ruiz, and his predecessor, José Múrat (Martínez Vásquez 2007).<sup>16</sup>

Most political struggles in Oaxaca, at one point or another, manifest themselves in urban public space. While the state continues to be mostly rural, the political apparatus of the state has been largely centralized in the capital city. It is true that local politics have a long been brokered through local caciques (political bosses), the official institutions of the state have been housed in the historic center of Oaxaca City since colonial times. For this reason, political conflicts throughout the state often result in marches, road blocks and/or encampments in the center of Oaxaca city, with the zócalo being the regular target. Part of this is because the Palacio de Gobierno (State Capitol building) has been housed in the zócalo. This, however, changed when Governor Ulises Ruiz entered office in 2004. One of his first acts was to relocate the executive branch from the zócalo of the capital city to San Bartolo Coyotepec, a town outside of the city where the new Ciudad

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<sup>16</sup> See also CCIODH 2008, LASA 2007, Stephen 2007b.

Administrativa (Administrative City) currently sits behind large metal fences and armed guards. His reasoning for doing so was clear, yet ultimately unsuccessful- to avoid the encampments in the zócalo (Díaz Montes 2009).

In 2005, Ruiz unilaterally initiated a series of unpopular public works, including major remodeling of the zócalo, Plaza de la Danza (a plaza in the historic city center that has traditionally been the site of cultural and political events), and Paseo Juárez (commonly referred to as El Llano). This sparked a series of protests, which Mexican scholar Margarita Dalton described to me in an interview in 2007 as resulting, in part, from widespread allegations of corruption in the granting of state contracts for unnecessary and unpopular projects to *priista* unions. This is consistent with a long history of clientelism, whereby the post-revolutionary Mexican state has fostered and co-opted labor unions, converting members into vast electoral reserves it taps during election cycles in exchange for material concessions such as state contracts (Fox 1994). Moreover, Ruiz's brother is said to have owned many of the construction companies that received state contracts, leading to the perception that the governor was funneling money into his own pockets through inflated contracts.

Ruiz's remodel of the zócalo included plans to "modernize" it by removing the majority of the vegetation and replacing it with cement. In addition to allegations of corruption, opposition to these works arose based on concerns over the perceived assault on Oaxaca's cultural patrimony, environmental conservation and discontent over Ruiz's unilateral decision making. It is important to remember that the spaces Ruiz targeted for remodeling form the backbone of the Historic Centre of the capital city, which UNESCO has designated a World Heritage Site. According to the UNESCO website, 1,200 historic

monuments line the streets of Oaxaca to “create a harmonious cityscape, and reconstitute the image of a former colonial city whose monumental aspect has been kept intact.” The “modernizing” of the historic city center by Ruiz’s administration occurs in contradiction with the enforcement of strict building codes and efforts to remodel parts of the tourist city center to match colonial architecture as part of campaigns by state and federal government to “control the portions and elements of these three periods [pre-Hispanic past, Spanish colonial period and the indigenous Mexico of today] that greet tourists who travel to Oaxaca” (Wood 2008).

Many Oaxacans felt that Ruiz was vandalizing their cultural patrimony and some came out to the streets to defend it. José, an indigenous teacher who was an active participant in the social movement of 2006, told me that the first barricades of the Ruiz era were raised by people trying to protect an ancient tree in the zócalo from being destroyed as part of the remodel. Although the tree was eventually removed (see Figure 11 below), Jose describes the barricades as “a symbol of popular protest against (Ruiz’s) authoritarianism and corruption.” During the social movement of 2006 and afterwards, the raising of barricades and battles over Oaxaca’s cultural patrimony will be central to an evolving politics of public space and youth activism in Oaxaca.



Figure 11: Zócalo remodel 2005a. Photo credit: Ezequiel Gómez Leyva.



Figure 12: Zócalo remodel 2005b. Photo credit: Ezequiel Gómez Leyva.

One of the most powerful organizing forces in Oaxaca has been Sección 22 (Local 22)- the local dissident wing of the National Education Workers' Union (SNTE).



The SNTE is the largest and arguably most powerful labor union in Latin America with 1.2 million members, although the recently inaugurated administration of President Enrique Peña Nieto threatens to weaken the union with neoliberal educational reforms and the recent imprisonment of long-time leader Elba Esther Gordillo (Hérendez Navarro 2013). Originally formed in 1943 under the corporatist system of the post-revolutionary Mexican state, the teachers' union was granted a monopoly on representing all of the nation's educational workers in primary and secondary schools, and like other "favored" unions their membership was converted into vast electoral reserves to be tapped during election cycles (Monroy 1997). Various states, especially those in South and Central Mexico, have waged a decades long struggle to democratize the union, with more than 100 teachers being assassinated in Oaxaca alone (Bacon 2006; Cook 1996). Political scientist Jonathan Fox refers to this strategy of fostering, co-opting and repressing unions in Mexico as part of the Mexican government's system of "authoritarian clientelism" (1994). In 1979, the struggle to democratize the union led to the formation of the democratic caucus within the SNTE, the National Education Workers Coordinating Committee (CNTE). Sección 22 of the CNTE, Oaxaca's dissident wing of the teachers' union, has mobilized its membership of over 70,000 teachers on an annual basis for the past three decades in order to pressure the state to renegotiate their contracts.

On May 1, 2006, Sección 22 continued this tradition and mobilized in the state's capital city, presenting the government with a list of demands for a new round of contract negotiations. The list contained 17 demands including the restructuring of wages, classrooms/schoolhouses for rural communities where teachers were forced to teach

outdoors, scholarships, uniforms and shoes for low-income students (Martínez Vásquez 2007:60). This year, however, Governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz refused to enter into meaningful negotiates with the union. He entered office with a hardline stance against protests, declaring an end to sit-ins and marches. Instead of negotiating, Ruiz Ortiz launched a media campaign aimed at turning public opinion against the teachers. Moreover, union officials accused the secretary general of the state of fermenting internal divisions within the union. Most notably there were accusations against union leader Enrique Rueda Pacheco of accepting bribes from the government.

On May 22, 2006 Sección 22 set up an encampment in the zócalo and five days later the government offered the union a contract that was considerably weaker than the previous years contract and threatened to discount their salaries for days missed if they did not return to work immediately (Martínez Vásquez 2007). After union officials rejected the offer, Ruiz threatened recall his offer and give striking teachers' jobs to scabs. On May 31<sup>st</sup> Local 22 mobilized and blocked access to gas stations and main roads in the historic downtown area of the capital. The government responded with increasingly hostile threats, with the support of state congress, *priista* mayors and local businessmen (ibid). The union responded with marches on June 2<sup>nd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup>. Organizers estimated 80,000 participants in the first march and nearly 200,000 in the second march (ibid:63). Martínez Vásquez reports a visible presence of mother, fathers, students, civil society, civil organizations, unions and urban neighborhood associations in the July 7<sup>th</sup> march. Ruiz Ortiz responded by sending police to intimate the teachers. Public opinion was divided, many people seemed to be equally tired of the frequent protests by the teachers

as they were skeptical of the governor, who entered office amid widespread allegations of fraud.

### ***Social Movement of 2006***

It is in this context of ongoing struggle that the 2006 social movement emerged, giving surprising coherence to the grievances of an incredibly diverse segment of Oaxacan society. The final action that triggered the formation of this social movement occurred during the very early morning hours of June 14<sup>th</sup>, 2006, when police forces numbering anywhere from 870-3,000 officers (Osorno 2007; Martínez Vásquez 2007), violently removed sleeping teachers and their families from the encampment in the zócalo. Police used batons, dogs, guns, and launched tear gas from privately owned helicopters on the sleeping teachers (Martínez Vásquez 2007:66). The indiscriminate bombing of the area with tear gas left hundreds of people seeking refuge and medical assistance- including many non-teachers who live, work or had other business in the busy downtown area that morning. 113 people registered at local hospitals with injuries resulting from the police repression, ranging from gun shot wounds to miscarriages and perforated lungs (Martínez Vásquez 2007:66).

In addition to indiscriminate attacks on people's bodies, the police destroyed all in their path burning the teacher's tents, tarps and personal belongings. In addition to the encampment, the union had a radio station called Radio Plantón, which served as a parallel public space to that of the encampment. According to Mexican professor of Communications and Politics Margarita Zires, once the union sets up its encampment in the zócalo on May 22, "this radio begins to convert itself into an important voice of the

Movement, a alternative media public space...it forms part of the milieu of the encampment in the zócalo” (2009:164). The radio warned of the possibility of a police action directed at clearing the encampment in the days leading up to June 14<sup>th</sup>. When the time came and the police attacked the encampment, they also attacked the teachers’ union headquarters and the radio tower, taking the station off the air.

The governor’s decision to repress the teachers immediately backfired. Many people who were not otherwise sympathetic to the teachers union (as well as many who already supported the union such as allied labor unions, university students and friends and family) rushed to the teachers’ aid that morning. By midday the teachers, along with thousands of their fellow citizens, retook the zócalo (Sotelo Marbén 2008). For example, a retired nurse I spoke with named Doña Ines<sup>17</sup> lent her medical services to those in need on June 14th by helping out at an impromptu medial clinic that was set up at a nearby church. She told me that she had never been a “political” person, nor did she agree with the teachers union’s tactics (i.e. work stoppages, encampments, and marches) because she found them disruptive to the daily lives of people in the city, as well as to the education of students. However, Ruiz’ decision to attack the teachers and anyone else who happened to be in the way that morning enraged her, propelling this otherwise “apolitical” senior citizen to lend her support to protesters throughout the tense months that followed. She recalled, “They were protesting as they

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<sup>17</sup> I gave everyone who participated in this research the option of using pseudonyms to protect their identity. Some, including “Doña Ines,” opted to use a pseudonym, while others chose to have only their first name used because of ongoing campaigns of repression.

always do, with their encampments, blocking streets and all of that. But this imbecile...why did he have to do this? He went too far.”

On the other end of the spectrum, many of those who came to the defense of the teachers that day were youth. Some participated in the defensive action that day because they had family members who were teachers, others lived nearby and were affected by the indiscriminate teargasing that morning, yet others participated in large part because of their already antagonistic relationship with police. The participation of graffiteros and punks, for example, has particular antecedents with many of them already accustomed to being harassed, arrested, beaten and humiliated by police. The criminalization of their lifestyles and of their very bodies has marked many of them deeply, as has their social marginalization. Several graffiteros and punks mentioned their relationships with police previous to 2006 as part of the reason they were ready and willing to be at the frontlines of battles with police on June 14<sup>th</sup> and in the months and years that followed. A young man who has been a part of the “punk movement” since he was a teenager in the early 2000s, and whom I will introduce in the next chapter, explained his participation on June 14<sup>th</sup> to me in an interview several years later:

Before that [repression of June 14] we were already coming down to the zócalo, to the teachers’ encampment. There we would run into people from other collectives and from our own collective, CESOL. We were already on the lookout because there were always the rumors that they were going to be evicted from their encampment and all of that. So when the repression started on June 14<sup>th</sup>, by that time many of us had cell phones or other ways of communicating. For example, a friend called me at 5:30 or 6 in the morning asking me if I was ready

because the repression had begun. By that time we were already living here [a colonia on the Northwest outskirts of the city off of the International Highway]. So what I did was get on my bicycle [bike towards downtown], ditch the bike and go support the teachers. I arrived, saw several friends and thought “Holy shit this is really it!” It was cool, you know. It lasted several hours; I think it was around 11am that we were able to recover the zócalo. In my opinion what motivated the *banda* or the youth, to go and support the teachers was what I was telling you earlier, we were sick and tired of so much repression.<sup>18</sup> That was the moment for all of us to show them that we were fed up with so much injustice by all pouncing at the same time against the police. They were the ones who were always fucking with us. We would show the government that it wasn’t cool to keep doing what they were doing anymore.

Overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of people who mobilized against them, the police returned to their barracks and refused to take further action against the peaceful protesters. Teachers reestablished their encampment in the city’s zócalo but were now joined by other formal organizations and youth collectives who also set up encampments. Simultaneously, university students at the Autonomous University of Oaxaca “Benito Juárez” (UABJO) organized the takeover of their university’s radio station, Radio Universidad. This radio station proved to be as crucial for the emerging movement as Radio Plantón had been for the teachers, helping organize actions and mobilizations. For

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<sup>18</sup> A word on translation- *banda* is a word used repeatedly by many of the youth in my study. This word is sometimes translated as gang but that is not the usage here. In this context, *banda* tends to refer to youth from popular neighborhoods or specifically to the speaker’s group of friends. For this reason I choose to retain the original *banda* in my translations of interviews.

example, two days after the police attacks, hundreds of thousands of Oaxacans participated in a massive march demanding the governor's removal.

Beyond Oaxaca, existing networks and alternative media provided immediate coverage to the emerging movement, although the commercial media remained silent. Several prominent indigenous activists from Oaxaca, such as Jaime Martínez Luna and Joel Aquino, as well as Oaxaca-based intellectuals like Gustavo Esteva were advisors to the Zapatistas (Zapatista Army of National Liberation or EZLN) and more recently members of the teachers union, youth collectives and other activists were involved in *La Otra Campaña*, a project spearheaded by the Zapatistas earlier that year meant to strengthen connections between communities, groups and social movements in Mexico and planned as an alternative to the process of political party campaigns. By noon on June 14, 2006, the connections between Zapatistas and Oaxacan activists crystalized in a widely distributed informative bulletin denouncing state violence in Oaxaca and urging supporters to “CONDEMN THIS NEW DEMONSTRATION OF STATE REPRESSION with public statements and actions of support” and “Not to trust any information disseminated about these events in the mass media” (Subcomandante Marcos 2006). This information was hosted by alternative media outlets such as Narco News, Indymedia and the Zapatista's own website.

On June 17<sup>th</sup>, the teachers union convened a public assembly, inviting over three hundred organizations and movements who were active in Oaxaca to discuss how to best capitalize on the momentum generated over the past days. The teachers proposed extending the structure of their union's assembly-style decision-making body, the State Assembly of Sección 22 Delegates, to greater Oaxacan civil society (Martínez Vásquez

2007). It is important that the assembly is far from a union invention; it has a long and dynamic history in Oaxaca, being the main decision-making structure in the 418 of the state's municipalities where indigenous communities are governed by *usos y costumbres* (indigenous customary law and tradition). They called the new organizing structure the Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca (Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca or APPO).<sup>19</sup>

After the first meeting, the assembly agreed on the resignation of Ruiz as their principal demand- though it would be a mistake to limit the grievances of the APPO to this singular goal (Osorno 2007). The APPO also pushed for a new state constitution that represented the plurality of the state and demanded an end to the repression of political dissent. While the APPO was the main organizational space for the emerging social movement, without which the movement would likely have never reached the heights that it did, it is important to acknowledge that many individuals and collectives who participated in the movement did not necessarily identify as *appistas* (APPO members). For this reason it is important not to conflate the broader social movement of 2006 with the APPO. This is an especially poignant distinction in the case of youth who identified as libertarian<sup>20</sup> or anarchist, as well as people who participated more out of feelings of

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<sup>19</sup> Originally the *Pueblos* (Peoples) in APPO was singular the *Pueblo* (People) but was soon changed to reflect the plurality of Oaxaca's people and of the movement.

<sup>20</sup> In this study, libertarian reflects my translation of activists' own identification as being *libertario/a*, which does not coincide with the libertarianism found in the Libertarian Party or certain sectors of the Tea Party Movement in the United States, which emphasize the rights of the individual and fiscal conservatism. Rather, libertarian's in this study are more in line with a libertarian-socialism and in some cases use libertarianism and anarchism interchangeably.



outrage over the government's indiscriminate use of violence but who were weary of being associated politically with opposition organizations.

This complicated relationship between the APPO and sectors that mobilized in 2006 but do not call themselves *appistas* makes it important to distinguish between the broader social movement of 2006 and the APPO. This said, the APPO was the main organizing structure and “civic space” of the movement, made up of large numbers of civic organizations, non-profits, and political associations and organizations all with diverse agendas (Esteva 2010). These tensions and nuances between belonging/not belonging and formal/informal participation will be central themes throughout the dissertation.

In any case, from mid-June through the end of November the capital city of Oaxaca was effectively under grassroots control. The APPO and affinity groups spearheaded the coordination of cultural events, massive mobilizations, the execution of state functions such as policing, trash collection and governance, as well as the transmission of original grassroots radio and television programming throughout the state (and internationally via the internet) following the take over of the stations by women in the movement, and youth covered the city in political street art denouncing the governor and advertising popular resistance in Oaxaca for local, national and global audiences to see. Through these actions, the popular movement reclaimed, reconfigured and redefined public spaces and severely challenged the government's ability to govern.

### *Conceptualizing the Social Movement of 2006*

In order to best understand how the social movement of 2006 operated during the six months of grassroots governance I suggest we frame it using the concept of the meshwork. Arturo Escobar (2008:366, n5), borrowing from Manuel de Landa (1997), has termed movements that emerge from self-organizing and overlapping networks that are characterized by heterogeneous compositions and non-hierarchical and decentralized decision-making structures meshworks. These formations are notable in that their ontologies are not fixed or rigid. Instead, they represent the diversity of which they are products, resulting in especially fluid and adaptable formations. They engage in both vertical and horizontal networking, are interlinked with other hierarchies and meshworks, and yet they maintain their characteristic plurality without imposing uniformity (Escobar 2008; Stephen 2007a). By conceptualizing the Oaxacan social movement this way, we can trace the events of 2006 through the parallel organizational structures that operated within the more formal spaces of the APPO and the more informal grassroots manifestations of the movements, such as independent youth collectives.

For social movement scholars, utilizing the meshwork concept is especially useful because it allows us to benefit from the flexibility of the network concept which is better suited than structuralist approaches to account for phenomena of change (Diani and McAdam 2003). The unique organizational (i.e. structural), strategic and membership characteristics make meshworks distinguishable from more narrowly defined movements whose agendas are largely linked to changes to specific policies or political structures, such as the teachers' union. The meshwork concept provides the researcher with a framework through which we can follow the various currents that may be operating

simultaneously at any given moment within a social movement. In this way, the meshwork goes beyond the focus of the network, which tends to privilege one node (an actor, organization, etc.) and work outward from there. In contrast to these approaches, the meshwork concept recognizes the “multilayered entanglement” that occurs in social movements like the Oaxacan movement of 2006, thus accounting for the various interlinked networks that bridge scale and difference, while not losing sight of the total effect they produce (Escobar 2008).

There are several other theoretical approaches that recognize the importance of networks in social movements, however I believe that the meshwork is more useful in analyzing contemporary social movements such as the Oaxacan movement. Resource Mobilization (RM) theorists, for example, have long recognized that social networks are key to social movement *success*.<sup>21</sup> They view networks as resources to be mobilized by rational actors, as “facilitators of participation,” and as “social capital” (Jasper 1997; Diani and McAdam 2003). This view is helpful in as much as it recognizes the utility of networks, however RM privileges the role of leaders and takes for granted that social movements primary objective is incorporation to current political structures (Canel 1997). So, while RM is well-suited to explain the ‘How’ of social movement emergence it is not so useful in accounting for movements with a non-hierarchical structure or those whose goals are not reformist. Critics of this approach argue that such an instrumentalist view of protest misses the complexity of what actually happens within social networks

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<sup>21</sup> Evaluating social movement success or failure, often based on the institutional/policy impact of movements, has preoccupied social movement scholars for decades. I am more worried about what social movements can tell us about how “ordinary people” are resisting their oppression, especially in light of the increasing militarization of North America.

and social movements, and how they impact society vis-à-vis “broader processes of cultural transformation” (Edelman 2001:290).

Instead of viewing networks as objects (as in RM) or as separate from social movements (Fox 2000; Keck and Sikkink 1998), I turn to work that recognizes that networks can be both a tool, a strategy and a goal for social movements. Anthropologists such as Jefferey Juris (2008) and David Graeber (2009) highlight the prefigurative nature of current social movements. By underscoring the horizontal logic of networking, they acknowledge that through networking activists are enacting the social change they want to see by creating non-hegemonic connections with other activists. These relations are not based on domination or exploitation; rather they are based on decentralized coordination and consensus-based decision-making. Juris acknowledges that this horizontal logic is the ideal, and that in practice the reality is much more complex and contentious.

This is where the meshwork concept proves useful because it allows us to follow these tensions between competing logics in broad-based social movements such as the Oaxacan movement of 2006. By emphasizing the fluidity and heterogeneity of social movements, the meshwork concept goes beyond the network concept by treating the dynamic tensions within social movements as part-and-parcel of movements instead of as failures. As such, the job of the researcher becomes to track these different currents while highlighting the total effect that they yield.

The social movement of 2006 demonstrates how various kinds of power structures can coexist within a given meshwork and how various currents can simultaneously move in different and unplanned directions, yet in the process produce a total effect. Here I do not mean to insinuate that this internal diversity and flexibility

always, or even usually, result in coherence and consensus. Instead, in the section that follows I demonstrate how these dynamics play out on the ground, both triumphantly and contentiously. While the chapters that follow argue for the need to rethink how we assess social movement temporality by taking a more long-term approach to social movement life, taking a snapshot of the movement's emergence and tracking the ebb and flow of mobilization during this initial 6-month period allows us to analyze the meshwork's strengths and vulnerabilities, while also laying the historical and political background necessary to understand the emergent political cultures being constructed by youth associated with this movement.

### ***Six months of Grassroots Governance***

The social movement of 2006 demonstrates the heterogeneity inherent in the meshwork. At its height, the APPO alone was composed of over 300 member organizations and movements representing a diverse spectrum of groups, such as the powerful teachers union, human rights groups, NGOs, multidisciplinary artist collectives, dozens of indigenous, student, women's and peasant organizations, anarchist youth collectives, the Communist Party of Mexico, and supporters of Mexico's mainstream parties. As it follows, the APPO's decision-making structure is a hybrid of the institutionalized vertical form inherited from the teachers union and other labor unions and "old left" political organizations where there is a formal leadership structure; a reinterpretation of the assembly form of governance found in many indigenous communities where there are chosen representatives who make decisions based on consensus; and a more flexible horizontal self-organized form which is found at the

grassroots level of the movement, such as independent youth collectives who did not belong to the formal assembly. This fusing of elements from previous movements is what some scholars have referred to as “movement spill-over”- a concept that allows us to emphasize what is both new and old about current social movements (Brown et al. 2004). The parallel forms of vertical and horizontal organizing and networking found in the APPO are definitive of the meshwork and allow for a much greater mobilizing potential and flexibility than a movement engaged in only one or the other form of networking and organizing.

Due to the fact that various kinds of power structures may be operating simultaneously within a given meshwork, these movements can be especially difficult to co-opt or otherwise disarticulate since there is not a formal leadership class that can be targeted. This proved to be the case in Oaxaca as government efforts to disarticulate the movement failed during the initial 6 months of APPO mobilizations. Through a network of barricades and a popular security force the movement was able to keep paramilitaries and federal police from taking over key installations. During this time, the movement controlled much of the capital city as most government functionaries had abandoned Oaxaca City. From early on in the emergence of the APPO, the state government pursued a strategy of simultaneously negotiating with the teachers’ union leadership and repressing the movement. The likely reason for this is that the government of Ulises Ruiz Ortiz was counting on three things: 1) that the teachers union leadership commanded the APPO, 2) that the union leadership could be co-opted, and 3) that what it saw as rank-and-file *apistas* would be intimidated by the repression and abandon the movement. Ruiz’ government was wrong on at least two of these counts, since entering into

negotiations with the teachers union and repressing the APPO did not deter, or even slow down mobilizations by the APPO. However, this example does illustrate how various currents of a meshwork can move in different, and sometimes contradictory directions since Local 22 entered into negotiations with the government in spite of the fact that many in the APPO were vehemently opposed to any negotiations until Ruiz was removed from office.

In spite of “advancements” between Local 22 and the government of Ulises Ruiz, repression of *appistas* and presumed sympathizers, including many teachers, continued to be widespread in the early months of the movement. Political arrests (often carried out without arrest warrants), disappearances, and beatings were perpetrated by local and federal police, as well as by paramilitary forces throughout Oaxaca (CCIODH 2008; Sotelo Marbén 2008). Widespread (often indiscriminate) repression can be one of the unintended consequences of the meshwork’s resistance to cooptation and selective repression. These tactics of “low-intensity” warfare were meant to intimidate and disarticulate the movement but instead resulted in greater momentum and support for the APPO. In July of 2006, the movement held a march that drew somewhere between 500,000-1 million participants (Osorno 2007; Martínez Vásquez 2007), which represents anywhere from 15- 30% of the state’s entire and mostly rural population marching through the capital city (see Figure 13). The marchers demanded the resignation of the governor, a new state constitution and an end to the illegal government repression of the movement. The ability to mobilize such a huge percentage of the state’s population demonstrates the meshwork’s impressive mobilizing capabilities, especially the ability to articulate networks, that bridge significant difference.



Figure 13: "Megamarcha." Photo credit: Mario Jiménez Leyva

Following this massive show of mobilizing power, various currents continued to move in contradictory directions, yet the meshwork's hybrid structure proved to be both highly flexible and resilient, as these contradictions were again overshadowed, at least momentarily, by successful direct actions. As a result of continued negotiations with the government, the teachers union agreed to temporarily return to classes. This was a contentious agreement. Many teachers and parents agreed to the temporary return to classes, at least so that students could finish the school year, but others in the APPO felt compromising with the government was unacceptable until Ulises Ruiz was removed from office. However, at the same time as the teachers were negotiating their return to classes, other networks within the movement were actively and creatively engaged in acts of civil disobedience meant to force Ruiz to cancel the annual Guelagueta festival, which is the state's main tourist attraction.



The Guelaguetza is a cultural festival celebrated in communities throughout the state but the government has its own version which it holds in the capital city. Folk-artists come from around the state to perform free-of-charge at the state-sponsored Guelaguetza, which is marketed as a celebration of Oaxaca's great ethnic diversity. Paradoxically, the majority of Oaxacans cannot afford the price of admission and have never been to the government-sponsored Guelaguetza. The APPO claimed that the Guelaguetza belonged to Oaxacans and not the government or capitalist interests. Thus they launched their campaign to force the cancellation of the for-profit state-sponsored festival. During this campaign of civil disobedience, the main stage at the venue was set on fire. Union leadership and other public figures were quick to denounce these acts of vandalism, seeking to distance themselves from more radical currents within the movement. The more militant APPO networks, including radical youths, continued their campaign and eventually succeeded in forcing Ruiz to cancel the commercialized festival. As an alternative to this festival, the APPO held their own free-of-charge Guelaguetza a few weeks later. Thousands of Oaxacans who had never attended the state-sponsored festival attended the "Popular Guelaguetza" in 2006. The Popular Guelaguetza has been held again every year since, and has been one of the more visible and lasting legacies of the APPO.

The tension within the APPO surrounding the tactics used in this campaign of civil disobedience is a great example of one of the main tensions in the APPO- that between the more "traditional" actors in the movement, such as heads of established organizations with more vertical structures on the one hand, and the more radical, autonomous activists who operate horizontally on the other. Anarchist, punk and Leninist

youth represent one extreme and the teachers union leadership and NGO professionals represent the other. It is important to recognize that while actors on both ends of this spectrum act without “permission” or prior approval from the APPO assembly, the youth tend to be more publicly ostracized for their actions since they do not have institutional backing. Also, it is important to note that many rank-and-file teachers participated and continue to participate with youth in direct actions. When I asked a teacher named Abril about the relationship between the teachers and the radical youth she summed up her feelings like this:<sup>22</sup>

I would rather fight alongside these kids (*chavos*) than many of my fellow teachers who denounce them. They tell the youth that they don’t want them in the movement, they tell them to take off their bandannas, to show their faces and go home. But I tell them that I rather be behind these kids than next to them because the kids are the ones who get their heads cracked open by the police. They are the ones who defend us teachers and older people. They tell us ‘Teachers, go get out of here. We will hold them off.’ And they do, they launch rocks at the police with slingshots. These kids are amazing with those slingshots. And I would rather have them next to me than many of my fellow teachers who are only at the marches because of union obligations.

Abril’s explanation reveals the tension between competing logics and ideologies that are found in broad-based movements such as the APPO. In the case of the APPO, there continues to be a gulf between Abril’s generation, whose political formation has followed

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<sup>22</sup> Interview conducted by author on August 5th, 2008.

a more Orthodox Marxist ideology, which assumes the importance of a vanguard, and the younger generation whose political formation has occurred in the wake of the Zapatista uprising in the neighboring state of Chiapas. These youth activists revere autonomy and horizontalism and thus reject vertical decision-making, which their older counterparts don't always understand or agree with. These ideological differences can cause tension, but activists on both sides of this divide, and those somewhere in between, have for the most part been able to set aside these differences and focus on the goals they have in common.

Another characteristic of meshworks is that they grow in unplanned directions. An example of this came on Aug 1, 2006 when thousands of women marched through the city in protest against escalating government repression of the movement. At the end of the march, an impromptu meeting was held and a large contingent of women decided to go to the state-owned television station, *Canal 9*, to request an hour of airtime to counter the pro-government views that dominated the national and local airwaves. When the television director denied their request for airtime on the public station they decided to peacefully overtake the building which also housed a state-owned FM radio station (Freidberg 2007; Stephen 2007b). The movement now had a television and high-powered radio station under their control. A teacher named Maribel explained the conditions leading up to their decision to take over the station like this:

Unfortunately the media always says that nothing is happening in Oaxaca- this is because they are all bribed by the government. This is why we women took *Canal 9*. We had to tell our side of the story. We had to show that yes, there is something happening in Oaxaca and it is not what the bad

government or its media say. We Oaxacan women had to take the TV and radio to prove that in our state el pueblo stood up and said “Enough, we have had enough of this corruption, of this violence, of these bad politicians.”<sup>23</sup>

The women renamed the radio and TV stations Radio Caserola (Casserole Radio). Radio Caserola became a conduit for the voiceless in Oaxaca and a powerful organizing tool for the movement. The station aired grassroots programming in at least 6 different indigenous languages and included programming that linked local events to macro-processes such as the murders of women in Oaxaca in relation to the murder of women in Ciudad Juárez; the poverty in Oaxaca in relation to neoliberalism; and the heightened authoritarianism of recent years in relation to Plan Puebla-Panama (Stephen 2008). According to Lynn Stephen, the new radio and TV stations became, “the chief means for people to voice their opinions, receive news, and have debates” (Stephen 2008:4). The programming content of Radio Caserola is a great example of how social movements can act as producers of counter-hegemonic knowledge.

The women’s knowledge producing apparatus represented a new pillar in the movement’s organizing structure, again exemplary of the flexibility and unplanned growth of the meshwork. The station was also crucial in aiding community-based self-defense. After local police refused to leave their barracks to attack the movement, the head of Oaxacan Security and Transportation, Aristeo López Martínez,<sup>24</sup> assembled a

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<sup>23</sup> Interview conducted by author on August 5th, 2008.

<sup>24</sup> Aristeo López Martínez was executed in the middle of the day in downtown Oaxaca in January of 2009. At the time of his death he was a protected witness of the *Procuraduría General de la República* (Office of the General Prosecutor) in the investigation against

force of under-cover police, rumored to include out of state paramilitaries, to repress the movement (Stephen 2008). This national network of paramilitaries entered neighborhoods at night in convoys of trucks full of highly armed and masked men, made illegal arrests and fired on APPO installations and encampments. Radio Caserola announced the location of these forces, and when illegal arrests were made, the Radio broadcast a description of the vehicle(s) used and encouraged people to find and stop the vehicles (Stephen 2008). The stations were also used to mobilize people to reinforce occupied government buildings.

In the middle of the night on August 20, 2006 paramilitary forces opened fire on and destroyed the transmission tower for the station. *Appistas* reacted immediately and by the morning of August 21<sup>st</sup>, they had already taken over the remaining 12 commercial radio stations in the city.<sup>25</sup> These takeovers are prime examples of how meshworks grow in unplanned directions and they signal the strength of the flexibility and adaptability of these social movement formations since activists don't have to wait for decisions to pass through a bureaucratic apparatus before taking action. Instead people in the movement are accustomed to making decisions and taking actions autonomously, as needed, which is very important when faced with the unpredictability of combined military and paramilitary repression.

On the same night as the round of radio station takeovers, convoys of up to 40 trucks of undercover police and paramilitaries covered much of the city, shooting at APPO encampments and murdering the unarmed Lorenzo San Pablo Cervantes who was

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allegations that police forces participated in paramilitary operations against the APPO in 2006.

<sup>25</sup> See Poole 2007 and Stephen 2007b for more on the take over of the radio in Oaxaca.

guarding one of the radio towers. The APPO again proved highly adaptable in the face of government repression by initiating the construction of neighborhood barricades. The barricades were erected every night as a means of preventing the “caravans of death” from entering neighborhoods, the Historic Downtown section of the city and other areas that were under grassroots control. The construction of barricades began at the grassroots level and was then promoted through APPO channels such as radio and the assembly. In this way we again see the efficiency and flexibility of the meshwork’s parallel power structures. It is important here to remember the construction of barricades in 2005 as an attempt to challenge Ulises Ruiz’s remodeling of key parts of the historic downtown, and thus recognize the barricade as part of a rich existing “repertoire of contention” in Oaxaca- that is, the barricade as one of the established practices available to protesters based on previous experience-direct or indirect (Tilly 1978).

David Venegas Reyes, an APPO counselor, youth activist, and founding member of VOCAL described the situation as follows in a published interview:

When police attacked and destroyed the occupied state television and radio and the people reacted by seizing twelve commercial radio stations...(this) marks the birth of the barricades. Many of us took to the streets that night to seize the commercial radio stations, and we had succeeded, we asked ourselves, “How can we defend these takeovers and protect the people inside?” That’s how the barricades are born.

That’s when my participation, along with the participation of hundreds of thousands of others, began to make a more substantial difference. Because the movement stopped being defined by announcements or events or calls for support

made by the teachers' union and began to be about the physical, territorial control of communities by those communities, by way of the barricades... Most of us who formed the barricade were from the surrounding neighborhoods. We were women and men, small children and old people, professionals and not, and with different amounts of money in our pockets... We eventually started discussing agreements and decisions made by the APPO Council and the teachers' union. There were a number of occasions when the barricade chose actions that went against those agreements, which in my view, only strengthened our capacity for organized resistance. In this way, the barricades reestablished and modified the social fabric of the neighborhoods, of the communities where they were. Our relationships with our neighbors changed. Many people who we considered to be friends or imagined we had things in common with weren't there, while other people who we hadn't spoken to before or hadn't had a voice in the neighborhood were active in the barricades. So at the barricades we formed new networks, new friendships, and new relationships of trust in our own communities ... and Oaxaca remains changed by those experiences (Quoted in Denham et al 2008:290-291).

David emphasizes the creation of novel social relationships, based on trust within the communities, the importance of place and the defense of urban territory as important legacies of 2006- this is exactly the kind of broad social transformation that approaches to social movements that focus purely on structural impacts miss. He contrasts the horizontal decision-making at the barricades to the top-down practice of the "APPO Council and teachers' union" which speaks to some of the tensions within the movement that lead youth to form their own spaces built on more horizontal models experimented

with in the barricades. These dynamics will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter. From late August until late November of 2006, these grassroots barricades protected communities and APPO installations from attacks by paramilitary and police forces while drawing in many people to the movement that had no previous political participation.

### ***Disarticulation***

The social movement's control over the capital city of Oaxaca came to end in late November when the outgoing administration of President Vicente Fox sent hundreds of military-trained Federal Preventative Police (PFP) to lay siege on the city. Throughout the month, activists defended their installations from the PFP but on November 25, they were forced to surrender their principal remaining radio station and their encampment. These losses were symbolic of the disarticulation of the movement. The brute force used by the PFP was too much for the nonviolent social movement to overcome, no matter how flexible and adaptable. In one week at least 192 people were taken prisoner by the PFP, many of them shipped to a maximum security prison in the Northern state of Nayarit (Stephen 2007b:108). One of the women I interviewed told me about a friend who was among those arrested and shipped to Nayarit. She told me that while in police custody, her friend was tortured and humiliated. She received electric shocks to the nipples and vagina, was photographed naked by police and was hung from a helicopter where she was told to scream like she did in the marches. Between June 14 and December 10 the social conflict in Oaxaca resulted in 26 murders, 450 arrests, countless injuries and almost 30 people "disappeared" (CCIODH 2008:212-214; Stephen 2007b).



According to the International Civil Commission for Human Rights Observation most recent report, the number of politically motivated murders in Oaxaca between the summer of 2006 and April 2008 was 62 (209).



Figure 14: "Sanidad y milagros" [Health and Miracles]. Photo credit: Baldomero Robles Mendez



Figure 15: "Ataca la PFP a miembros de la APPO en Ciudad Universitaria" [The PFP attacks members of the APPO in Ciudad Universitaria]. Photo credit: Blanca Hernández



Figure 16: "Entrada de la PFP en la parte sur de la ciudad de Oaxaca" [PFP entering from the south side of the city of Oaxaca]. Photo credit: Baldomero Robles Mendez

### *Conclusion*

The Oaxacan movement of 2006 emerged from overlapping social movements and networks that incorporated novel forms of political organizing and governance. These included operating community radio stations, following the assembly form of governance, creating a network of alternative institutions, as well as reclaiming and redefining public spaces and cultural festivals. Many of these successes can be attributed to the movement's ontology as a meshwork. For example, the various power and decision making structures within the movement made efforts to disarticulate the movement very difficult. These aspects also allowed the movement to grow in unplanned directions, as

with the reclaiming of public airwaves that resulted from the impromptu take-over of *Canal 9* and the reclaiming of neighborhoods through the construction of grassroots barricades. Conceptually, the meshwork concept proves adept at following these complex dynamic of emergence and organization.

However, these same factors combined with the characteristic heterogeneity of the social movement created some vulnerabilities, such as when the teachers union and other groups within the movement began to move in contradictory directions. The chapters that follow will map some of the instances of divergence, as well as convergence, that followed over the subsequent five years. By focusing on the political projects of youth who participated in 2006, we will be able to consider issues of social movement temporality, the impact of social movements on political cultures, and the role of space in contentious politics.

## CHAPTER IV

### BIOGRAPHICAL VIGNETTE: LA BRUJA

During 2006, youth participated in various capacities, including coordinating the delivery of donations from farming communities to the city, the erection and management of barricades, the creation of protest art, participating in movement run radio stations, video documentation and dissemination, and forming the frontlines in self-defense and defense of territory against attacks by police and paramilitary forces. It is notable that many of the youth who participated in 2006 were doing so independent of any organization, although many had family in the teacher's union. A CASOTA activist who goes by the nickname La Bruja Zapoteka<sup>26</sup> (herein La Bruja) participated in the social movement of 2006 as a teenager with no political affiliations. She is from the town of San Pablo Guelatao in the Sierra Juárez and her participation in 2006 took place both in her town and in the city.

La Bruja's participation began on June 14, 2006 when was sent by her mother to search for her father in the city. Members of the union took turns sleeping and manning the encampment, serving 5-7 day rotations. Her father was serving his turn at the zócalo when the police evicted them. What follows is part of the testimony she shared with me during an interview in 2010. I began by asking her how she experienced the social movement of 2006. She began by speaking about her father, the student movement of 1968, the guerrilla movements of the 1970s and the EZLN:

Well before 2006 I had a bit of *conciencia* (social consciousness), not so much of a political background but a little *concientización* (social awareness). Having to

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<sup>26</sup> Translates literally to the Zapotec Sorceress or Witch. More commonly she goes by the abbreviated La Bruja.

do with, for example, the EZLN, the whole dirty war, the 2<sup>nd</sup> of October.<sup>27</sup> Part of that is because of my father. Actually, much of that is because of my father because when he was 12 years old he had to migrate from here in Oaxaca to *el DF* (Mexico City). He lived in a house for students- The House of the Oaxacan Students. So while he was there he also received a political education and they also had shootouts with the *porros*.<sup>28</sup> So I have met a lot of the banda from the 23 of September Communist League<sup>29</sup>. His older brother was...well he was involved in a lot of things...they were both at El Halconazo.<sup>30</sup> I don't remember exactly the date- oh yes the 10<sup>th</sup> of June...10<sup>th</sup> of June of 1971 is when El Halconazo happened. They were there for that. And things like that, you know my father has always read *La Jornada*<sup>31</sup> and that kind of thing [here she laughs]...

Maurice: So did your dad leave Oaxaca in order to study or why did he leave the town?

La Bruja: Yes, he left so he could study and on top of that he studied high school at the CH Oriente and you know that's where the old school guys came from, they were the one's who started with all the [revolutionary] rhetoric [laughs again].

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<sup>27</sup> Here she is referring to the "Dirty War" waged by the Mexican government against presumed guerrillas in the 1960s, 70s and 80s. The 2<sup>nd</sup> of October refers to the massacre of student protesters at Tlatelolco in Mexico City on that date in 1968.

<sup>28</sup> *Porros* are groups that are paid to illegally repress student organizers or student protests in Mexican high schools and universities. *Porros* may or may not be students themselves.

<sup>29</sup> Urban Mexican guerrilla movement from the 1970s.

<sup>30</sup> The massacre of student protesters in Mexico City by a paramilitary group on June 10, 1971.

<sup>31</sup> Left-leaning national newspaper.

Maurice: What is that school? I'm not familiar with it

La Bruja: It the UNAM's Sciences and Humanities High School...so my dad came with that kind of political education, he read a lot of books. So it's from there that I became very interested in reading. I remember that I was the first to start reading in my class because my father showed me how. He would give me books.

When I was very young, 8 years old, I went to my first march. It was a march in support of the Zapatistas. They came to my town, they came to Guelatao and I remember my mom and other woman made food for them. And my father was one of the ones who helped organize things. The teachers had us do a little march through the town and had us chanting slogans. The first chant I ever remember chanting was "Zapata Vive!" (Zapata Lives!) That was the chant I used do.

It is significant that La Bruja begins our discussion here, talking about her father's history of activism and about the Zapatistas. The student movement of 1968 is *the* reference point for youth activism in Mexico. The impact that the movement has left on Mexican society is far reaching. The repression of students, signaled most dramatically by the Tlatelolco Massacre marked an entire generation of Mexicans: Some, like my own father, learned that the government would not hesitate to kill you; Others, like La Bruja's father and uncle learned the same thing but responded by either joining or associating with armed guerrillas. She does not go quite as far as saying that her father and uncle joined the 23 of September Communist League, but she implies that her uncle did. Many of the

youth activists I interviewed mention a parent or close relative's previous activism as being significant in their own political development. Moreover, just as La Bruja mentions the Zapatistas in her account of her politicization, they are a main reference point for young activists in Oaxaca today. She continued by describing the events of June 14, 2006 as she experienced them:

And so when 2006 arrives...well at first you don't believe it, you don't expect it. You think things like this can happen in other place but not in your own house, in you own town. My dad was here in Oaxaca because he is a *telesecundaria* teacher (distance learning secondary school) and it was his turn to be at the teachers' encampment. At that time I was 16 or 17... I was still very young; I was in high school. So that morning I woke up listening to the radio like I always do and I heard that they were warning people not to go to the zócalo, that it was all horrible and who knows what. So that scared me, I knew my dad was there. I spoke with my mom very early that morning. I woke up at 5:30 in the morning since I studied in a school that was in another community. So we found out about what was happening around 5-5:30 more or less. I told my mom were saying but we didn't even know what was really happening because this was commercial media, so-

Maurice: Was this the radio?

Bruja: Yeah the radio, so we turned on the community radio, sometime they air news from Oaxaca [City]. So they started announcing that the police were attacking the teachers. Some of the teachers from the community had already organized. I think they called them on their phones, or I am not sure how it

happened but they communicated very quickly which was weird because the signal for cellular phones still hadn't arrived there [Guelatao]. So the teachers went to the community radio station and announced what was happening and well my mom was very worried but since my siblings were very little, one of them must have been 9 years old and the other one must have been around 5. Yeah, they were very young and the only one that was older and more or less knew Oaxaca [City] was me- but I didn't even know it that well, but it was up to me. My mom stayed with my little siblings and she was very sad and *angustiada* (anxious, distressed). She told me, "You go look for your dad. Go and search for him but be very careful." So I came by myself on the 14<sup>th</sup> [of June 2006]...So I arrived here and everything was still looking very bad. I was a little scared, you know seeing everything all burnt and destroyed. They said that there were teachers arrested and all kinds of rumors here in Oaxaca. A ton of police, and everything was so horrible. I didn't even make it to the zócalo. I was asking everyone I saw, of the people that were still around, if they knew anything of my dad's delegation. I don't even know how I got there, *la neta* [for real]. Eventually they told me that some of them were at the UABJO [the public university], others told me that they were at the IIEPO- the teachers' school. So I went to CU [UABJO campus] and I found a teacher who was friends with my dad. I asked him if he had seen him, or where he was or if anyone knew anything and he told me "Look I don't think your dad is here. I think he is at the IIEPO, it is safer there." So I went over there, to the teachers' school and my dad was there! He was already there with some *chavos* [kids] from the university making some



*molochas* [Molotov cocktails; she laughs here]. He was there, I stayed too, we were there a while and then the next day I returned to my house and my dad stayed.

La Bruja's account draws out attention to how important the radio is for disseminating news in Oaxaca, especially in rural communities who depend on community radio stations to keep them informed of the latest news. Related to this, La Bruja's story highlights how isolated most Oaxacans are from the city center, which is the political center of the state. This is true for those who live in rural communities, which again is the majority of the state's population. But as we will see in the following chapters, this is also true for Oaxacans living in peripheral colonias throughout the Oaxacan metropolitan area, thus signaling in part, the importance of the activist spaces opened in the city center post-2006.

La Bruja's account also offers a window into the complicated nature of the relationships between teachers and youth in Oaxaca. Her father is a teacher, an active member in the union and a very influential person in her life, but during a march in 2010 I witnessed her yelling passionately at a group of teachers. The teachers were chiding a group of youth who were marching with their faces covered, telling them to show their faces, to not go around like criminals. La Bruja stepped in between the youth and the teachers and began yelling at the teachers, "Now you don't want us here? Now you don't want us youth around at your marches but in 2006 during the attacks we were more than welcome! We cover our faces because we don't have a union behind us for protection! Covering our faces is our protection!" This tension between youth, especially anarchist and libertarian youth, and the teacher's union will be a recurring theme.

La Bruja continued her account of 2006 by talking about what happened when she returned to her community and by describing her mobility between her town and the city during 2006:

The rest was us in the communities began to organize ourselves. We took over some radios that weren't covering the news the way it should have been covered- they were disseminating news stories from *el Imparcial*.<sup>32</sup> You know of newspapers that belonged to the government. They didn't tell things the way the really were so we were upset. Before they would disseminate news stories from *La Jornada* but after that police evicted the teachers they stopped airing them. So lots of people got angry and we organized and decided we were going to go to the radio stations and ask for a space and if not, then we were going to take them over. And since it was a radio station that belonged to the government- it is called *La Voz de la Sierra* [ The Voice of the Mountains]- it belongs to the CDI (National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Peoples), what used to be the INI, the National Indigenist Institute. So it belongs to the CDI and we said, "We want a space!" But they didn't want to let us have a space, so we took it! We took over the radio and we began to transmit. We took advantage of the fact that it reaches a lot of communities and opened a donation center in Guelatao where we collected food, supplies, a ton of stuff to take to the people in the movement that were here [Oaxaca City]. We did that all of June and July. We brought donations for the *Guelaguetza Popular*, which was actually the first time I heard gun shots. Maurice: You were here for the Guelaguetza Popular?

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<sup>32</sup> Local newspaper that despite its name, is partial to the then ruling PRI party.

Bruja: Yeah I was here, I came with a friend from Guelatao that does video. So we came and we arrived kind of late. At that point we didn't find a lot of *banda* and also since I didn't attend school here, I didn't know anyone. I only came with my dad, we would go to the marches and then we would go back home together. So just as I didn't know anyone here, no one here knew me. I also didn't know the city that well so I didn't know how to move about. I didn't go around that much because it is dangerous like that...when you don't know. So we arrived that day, the 16<sup>th</sup> [of July 2006] when they started saying that there was a confrontation at the Cerro del Fortin. The furthest we could get was up to a business that decorates office called Decora. So we arrived wanting to see how far up we could make it but the banda was already coming back. The women, I remember seeing woman with their skirts, all dressed up ready for the celebration but damn, they were so scared, with their children, dragging their children. It was so horrible. So this friend and me got separated from each other. He began putting away his equipment, we began to put everything away, it was just impossible-

Maurice: He was videotaping?

Bruja: *Con un ojo al gato y otro al garabato* (Mexican saying that, in this case, refers to multitasking). We were testing, we weren't even recording yet, we didn't even make it to the top of the hill. So we began putting everything away and I remember the hollow sound of the gases, it was like a blast. There was a lot of banda there, I even saw some guys dressed in black and among them I recognized a friend of mine that had his brow busted. I think they had hit him with a rock and his face was busted up real bad so I helped him. After that the police were already

out of control. I think we arrived right when the attack started. So we took off running, I ran from- I don't even know how, where I got the strength, but we ran from the office store all the way to the intersection where the Volkswagen dealer is, where the Foro Tecate is now [a distance of just over 2 miles]. Running all the way there, and I remember that was where I heard the gunshots. They didn't shoot at us, I don't know who they were shooting at. That is where I felt like, it's over, they are going to kill me right here or they are going to catch me or something is going to happen to me. It is a very bad feeling of anxiety. You are practically running for your life. I remember that when I arrived I was wearing a black t-shirt that had a picture of a prehispanic dog, a Xoloitzcuintli. I showed up with my black shirt, pants and boots. They [the police] were going to recognize me, so I untucked my pants from my boots to cover them. But I still had my black shirt and various facial piercings, I had the eyebrows, the lips, so I took them all out and tossed them. The one from the tongue, I took out the one from the nose. And I remember there was this boy I had never seen before, I didn't know him and he didn't know me. This kid takes off his shirt, it was a white Tommy [Hilfiger] t-shirt. He takes off his t-shirt and is left with only his undershirt and he yells "Hey girl!" and he throws me the t-shirt. So right there, in the middle of the street, I take off my t-shirt, I put on the t-shirt, I toss the other one and I leave. I remember we took a collective taxi to El Tule. There at El Tule we wasted time, just walking around. But we did see when the police cars went by, pick-up trucks with people in them, trucks and trucks with police and people [prisoners]. It was something so awful when you realize that there is no limit to the cruelty that humans are

capable of. There are things that- well my mom doesn't understand much about his because she would say to me- for me, I have a view of police that they are...worse than animals, worse than dogs, pigs. And my mom would say to me, "But they have families, they have to support their families, they have to make a living somehow." And yes, of course, I understand that but there were things that the police did that they had no reason to do. Unnecessary beatings. Unnecessary insults. Cruelty, torture that was not, that had no reason. There was no reason for it. We weren't doing anything wrong. On the contrary, we were defending something that belonged to us (*nos correspondía*)-our rights, our freedom. Many things, many, many things. I think that the 14<sup>th</sup> of June was *la gota que deramó el vaso* (the straw that broke the camel's back). Many people that didn't even have much social consciousness joined. Many *señoras* (woman), many *viejitas* (old woman) that joined. And many children too. I remember various compas that were at the confrontations that were 9, 10, 11 years old that also didn't have much consciousness of why they were doing things but as they went on living the process they figured things out.

This last excerpt from our interview covers a lot of important aspects about youth participation in 2006. La Bruja's repeatedly references her appearance and that of her peers: "guys dressed in black"; "I showed up with my black shirt, pants and boots" "facial piercings" etc. Through these visual cues she is describing what has become normal to her: Certain youth are targets for police violence and those youth "look" like her. That "look" consists of dark clothes, dark boots, maybe a jacket with patches, facial piercings and perhaps a Mohawk or spiky hair, or some variation thereof of the Oaxacan

punk aesthetic. This reality coupled with the brutal violence that police and paramilitaries unleashed on hundreds of people during the social movement of 2006 have significantly marked many of the youth who were involved.

Doug McAdam's work on Black insurgency in the U.S. during the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (1999) and Laura Pulido's work on Third World Left movements in Los Angeles during the 1960s and 1970s (2006), outline a two-step process through which activists become politicized: 1) Confronting social injustice at an early age and/or having a family member involved in activism; and 2) A political opening that inspires action. La Bruja's biography displays both of these processes: She begins her testimony highlighting the importance of her father's activism in informing her own politicization; and the scene that awaited her when she arrived to Oaxaca City on June 14, 2006 and the emerging social movement provided a dramatic opening for her to become active. 2006 provided that opening for all of the youth in this study and nearly all of them had politically active family members or family members that were active in the past. As we will see in the chapters that follow, graffiti artists and punks also tend to have had the experience of being harassed by police prior to 2006, which follows the model offered by McAdam and supported by Pulido of activists having experienced injustice early in life.

CHAPTER V  
YOUTH SPACES OF RESISTANCE DURING OAXACAN SOCIAL  
MOVEMENT OF 2006

Before 2006 it was someone else's street. After 2006, it became our street. We see our space differently now. We see our space through the principles and values of 'comunalidad,' such as the importance of territory.  
David (VOCAL)

Territory is the space in which to build a new social organization collectively, where new subjects take shape and materially and symbolically appropriate their space  
Raul Zibechi (2012:19)

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***Introduction: Youth Participation in Social Movement of 2006***

As the social movement, and repression of the movement, evolved in the days and weeks following its emergence, movement networks grew more decentralized and came to include many Oaxacans who did not identify with the APPO but became involved in the larger social movement of 2006. Youth were visible participants in some of the most important spaces of resistance, especially those that were organized explicitly around horizontal decision-making, and autonomous and anti-authoritarian principles. These spaces included a series of occupied radio stations taken over by women from the movement, a citywide network of barricades and an abandoned police station converted into a youth-run social center. The collective experience of participating in the creation and evolution of these spaces has also greatly informed the political subjectivities and projects of autonomous youth activists in Oaxaca, particularly in regards to how they network and build relationships, and how they understand, use and reconfigure public space.

In this chapter I will consider how the production and maintenance of spaces of resistance in 2006 have had enduring material and social importance for the youth who participated in them. In the chapters that follow, we will see how the horizontal political cultures that were experimented with in the barricades, the radio stations and the social center permeate current projects. It is difficult for social movement scholars to capture the impacts that social movements have on the subjectivities of local actors and everyday social changes. However, I argue that such impacts can be made visible, in part, if we focus on the physical and social constitution of space as a window into the multiple ways that power and resistance are enacted, contested and negotiated.

My analysis begins with the recognition that public space is often the site, and object, of political struggle, with various state, capitalist, and civil society interests potentially having different, competing notions about the use, meaning, and nature of public space. Manuel Castell's work on urban social movements (1983) was fundamental in bringing public space and urban politics into focus in social movements theory, thus highlighting the fact that urban social movements are very much place-based and territorially defined, even if they are part of larger networks. In 2006, the *zócalo* was the key space of contention during the teachers' union strike, the violent response from the state government and the emergence of the larger social movement. Couple this with the subsequent battles over public space through the radio and television takeovers and the construction of a citywide network of barricades that reconfigures the city's streets, and the relevance of Castell's insights about the nature of urban social movements becomes apparent for the case of the Oaxacan social movement of 2006.



Moreover, there is perhaps no space more politically charged in Latin America than that of the *zócalo*. This should come as no surprise since as Setha Low reminds us, the Latin American plaza (*zócalo*) is the “preeminent public space, a source and symbol of civic power, with a long tradition as the cultural center of the city” (2000:35). The configuration and meaning of the *zócalo*, however, is far from fixed, with competing interests continually laying their claims to the cultural center. In Oaxaca, these changes were dramatically signaled when Governor Ruiz decided to remove the government offices from the plaza, where they had been located since colonial times. He relocated the administrative center of his government to a town outside the city, where armed guards, gates and walls replaced the openness of the *zócalo*.

As the movement and repression of the movement evolved, APPO networks grew more decentralized and came to include many Oaxacans who did not identify with the APPO but became involved in the larger social movement of 2006. Youth were visible participants in some of the most important spaces of resistance, especially those that were organized explicitly around horizontal decision-making, and autonomous and anti-authoritarian principles. These spaces included the occupied radio stations, the barricades, and an abandoned police station converted into an autonomous social center. Through the production of these spaces, youth helped decenter the *zócalo* as *the* point of power and energy in city and within the social movement, thus contributing to the collective remapping of the city which cannot be erased. The collective experience of participating in the creation and evolution of these spaces has also greatly informed the political subjectivities and projects of autonomous youth activists in Oaxaca, particularly

in regards to how they network and build relationships, and how they understand, use and reconfigure public space.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will consider some of these collective experiences with an emphasis on the politics of public space. Particularly, I will examine the ways in which the production of barricades throughout the city, the takeover of radio stations by women, and the youth takeover of an abandoned police station all provided diverse youth the spaces necessary to experiment with their political and social visions in collective, concrete practices with their peers and elders. Understanding how these events from 2006 inform the emerging youth political culture is necessary in order to begin the process of rethinking social movement temporality and continuity. To this end, in the following chapter (Chapter VI) I will consider how these experiments manifest post-2006, using the examples of youth-run spaces and collectives in Oaxaca City.

### ***Youth Spaces 2006: Barricades***

Originally raised as part of a strategy of self-defense and protection for the antennas of the occupied radio and television stations against paramilitary attacks, the citywide network of barricades numbered some 1,500. They were erected between 8 and 11pm every night and most were removed every morning at 6am to allow traffic to circulate, although some were more permanent especially after the deployment of the PFP. Neighbors gathered rocks, tires, downed trees, cars, commandeered buses and semi-trailers, or whatever objects they could acquire to build the barricades (see Figures 17, 18 and 19). The construction of the barricades began at the grassroots level and was then

promoted through APPO channels such as radio and the assembly, demonstrating the efficiency and flexibility of the movement's parallel power structures.



Figure 17: Barricade in Historic downtown 2006a. Photo credit: Source Unknown



Figure 28: Barricade in Historic downtown 2006b. Photo credit: Davidivan@flickr.com



Figure 39: Barricade being erected. Photo credit: Cryptome.

The barricades quickly became community spaces where neighbors who may have never spoken before would spend all night drinking coffee, eating, dancing and talking while reclaiming the streets, their neighborhoods, the historic city center, and their right to be free from violence (Figure 20). Being that the street is a basic unit of public life, an everyday public space where people are brought together to interact (Tonkiss 2006), it is not surprising that the reclaiming and reconfiguring of Oaxaca's streets in 2006 proved to be a transformative experience for the countless who participated. The raising and guarding of barricades turned strangers into comrades, and turned neighborhood residents into active participants in radical direct-democracy- a dynamic that Dzenovska and Arenas describe as "barricade sociality" (2012).



Figure 20: Woman guarding barricade during the night 2006. Photo credit: *El Universal*

Graffiti artist and rapper Serckas Fontseka belongs to AK Crew and VHS Crew, two active street art collectives in Oaxaca. He is the son of a widowed teacher from the nearby town of Zaachila, which saw a popular takeover of the municipal palace in 2006. Serckas attended high school in Oaxaca City in 2006 and belonged to a street art collective at the time called Mexico 68 composed of high school students from various colonias in the city and Zaachila. Serckas and his crew placed stencils and stickers throughout the city and he participated in various barricades in Zaachila (at night) as well as the city (during the day). Six years later, he explained the experience of guarding the barricades to me as follows:

On the one hand it was hanging out with the rest of the banda, you tried to be cool during tense moments. On the other hand, it's being with people in an unconventional way. People became great friends immediately because you shared in the struggle. Also you become aware that there are all kinds of banda, with different goals. And also [people] that you would have never come into

contact with otherwise. For example, you would see elders that in other times didn't even come out of their homes, and now they were out defending and socializing with you.

Serckas' account of the barricades as a point of encounter and interaction for otherwise disparate sectors of society resonates with historian Mark Traugott's work (2010) where he traces the history of the barricade as part of the repertoire of contention in 16<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century Europe. He suggests that barricades "also gives rise to a distinctive social space, along with a corresponding set of human relations that can be even more pivotal in determining how civil conflicts unfold" (185). Traugott describes this social space as being useful "to claim turf, challenge legitimacy, and build solidarity" (187). The building of novel social relations in the space produced through the barricades is an aspect that Serckas highlights and that was echoed by many. These social relations formed a vital part of the social movement network of 2006, and provided a sense of collective identity for participants, especially those that did not belong to a formal organization.



Figure 21: "Barricada Cinco Señores." Photo credit. Heinrich Shultze



Figure 22: Historic downtown barricade 2006. Photo credit: NYC Indymedia

For many youth from popular neighborhoods, the sense of social belonging created through the barricades was rare. As mentioned earlier, the current generation of youth in Mexico carry with them the stigma of being referred to as the generation of “*Ninis- ni estudian, ni trabajan*” (they don’t study, they don’t work). The implication being that the marginalization of Mexican youth is a result of their own laziness and complacency, not the effect of global economic restructuring and neoliberal policies. For poor and working class youth in Oaxaca there were (and continue to be) very few spaces open to them were they could feel their participation was legitimized by larger Oaxacan society. In this social milieu, people began to identify as being from Barricade X or

Barricade Y, and among youth we see the emergence of an identity as “barricader@s,”<sup>33</sup> or participants in the barricades (Figure 23), which continues to carry significant social capital. The following entry posted on the blog Todo el Poder al Pueblo on August 11, 2008, distinguishes youth who the blogger claims are outside agitators from other parts of Mexico, from “barrikaderos,”<sup>34</sup> who the blogger recognizes as being “a group that has an important function in the forms of expression, graffiti, urban posters and other forms.” Claiming that protesters or militants are outside agitators is a common tactic used by governments and media to discredit or turn public opinion against opposition movements and is one that is repeated here by the author of this blog post. To not get distracted with the details of the allegation, what is significant for now is that while the blogger was complaining about a particular youth presence, they made a point of affirming and legitimizing the place of barricader@s in the movement.

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<sup>33</sup> The use of the ‘@’ is meant to challenge the *de facto* masculine designation of the ‘o’ ending by including the feminine ‘a.’ It is a political statement that many youth are making throughout Latin American and the U.S. I include this usage here since it is the usage that the majority of youth activists use. Other alternatives are to substitute the ‘@’ with an ‘x’ or with an ‘A’ inside of and ‘O’ which is a common symbol for anarchy. See also “VOCAL Manifesto” which follows later in this chapter.

<sup>34</sup> This spelling reflects a tendency of working class youth to substitute the letter ‘k’ in place of ‘c’ and ‘qu’ which is the spelling used in the cited blog entry.





Figure 23: Image uploaded to Facebook of "Barrikader@s en pie de lucha" or "Barrikader@s in the struggle." Photo credit: Barricadero de Oaxaca

When I asked members of local street art crews Arte Jaguar and AK Crew<sup>35</sup> about their participation in the barricades in a group interview in 2010, several mentioned being asked by their neighbors to contribute pieces to their barricades. One of the artists who belongs to both crews and lives in the colonia of Pueblo Nuevo, remembers painting a piece at his neighborhood barricade:

I was at the barricade the first day of the *desmadre* [PFP repression], there I painted a semi-trailer, it was for the people of my barrio because they asked me, since they knew that I painted, "Why don't you paint something over here, in the barrio?" I said "Of course!" [It read] ¡Viva Pueblo Nuevo! Oaxaca, Mexico... I remember vividly it had a woman with her fist raised, and the damn phrase took up the whole trailer.

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<sup>35</sup> Arte Jaguar and AK Crew are discussed in detail in Chapter V.

Arte Jaguar is one of the more prolific and respected street art crews in Oaxaca. Members come mostly from colonias throughout the city, although some are migrants to the city from indigenous villages, and they are recognized as pioneers of the Oaxacan street art scene. As a collective, members are weary of being labeled as “political artists” or of having their work pigeonholed to 2006, but like many graffiteros they were very active in the social movement as artists, barricader@s and in confrontations with the police. In fact, the barricades became rich sites for the production and display of graffiti and other public visual art, as well as grievance and words of protest scrawled on any available surface. The cultural and social space of the barricade, where elders in their communities validated youth participation, was vital in fostering a sense of ownership in the movement, their neighborhoods and the city for autonomous youth. This collective experience and sense of belonging for otherwise marginalized youth proved to be transformative not only for youth but also for the expansion of the social movement beyond the more formal spaces of the teacher’s union and the APPO.

I encountered many young people who stated that joining the barricades was their first means of participation in the struggle. Silvia, an active youth in the APPO and a founding member of VOCAL, explains her involvement.<sup>36</sup>

Many of us met for the first time in the barricades in 2006...the barricades became part of my daily life but they were also part of a greater strategy. That was how we protected ourselves and the radio, but also how we showed, through our civil disobedience, that the government could not govern the city.

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<sup>36</sup> Interview conducted by author and Lynn Stephen, August 9, 2010.

Silvia is a migrant to the city from a town in the *Costa* (Costal) region of the state and was a sociology student at the state university in 2006. Her involvement with the movement began as a researcher, but one of the most important barricades in the city, *Cinco Señores*, blocked the entrance to her neighborhood so she passed through it everyday. As she began spending more time there with her neighbors, her participation soon changed from researcher to barricadera. In the above quote, Silvia makes the important point that beyond the practical strategy of self-defense and defense of territory, the barricades were a symbol to the government, media and local residents that signaled popular control of the city.

In addition to being an *entrée* into the struggle for many, the network of barricades, along with the occupied radio and television stations, were key means of deepening the grassroots *power* of the movement, which now encompassed broad sectors of Oaxacan society cutting across vast differences and geographies. Oaxaca-based intellectual Gustavo Esteva supports this view of the barricades:

The sudden presence in the movement of groups from the popular neighborhoods...was unexpected. It was not known to what extent the communal social fabric also existed in those neighborhoods. The barricades arose spontaneously as a popular response to the governor's attacks on the APPO encampments, and rapidly took on a life of their own, to the extent of becoming *autonomous* focal points for social and political organization. Long sleepless nights provided the opportunity for extensive political discussion, which awakened in many young people a hitherto nonexistent or inchoate social consciousness (Esteva 2010:985, emphasis added).

Esteva highlights the importance of the barricades in fostering the participation of residents of Oaxaca's popular neighborhoods and youth in particular. While I am cautious about overstating the "nonexistent or inchoate social consciousness" of young people pre-2006, it is clear that their experiences in the barricades have greatly informed their political subjectivities and we will see in the next chapter how some draw on these experiences in the years that follow. Recalling David's analysis about the role that the barricades played vis-à-vis the larger social movement, which I cited in the previous chapter, he highlighted the impact that the barricades had in decentering the formal spaces of the movement and expanding the more horizontal spaces:

That's when my participation, along with the participation of hundreds of thousands of others, began to make a more substantial difference... We eventually started discussing agreements and decisions made by the APPO Council and the teachers' union. There were a number of occasions when the barricade chose actions that went against those agreements, which in my view, only strengthened our capacity for organized resistance. In this way, the barricades reestablished and modified the social fabric of the neighborhoods (Quoted in Denham et al 2008:290-291).

Here, David contrasts the horizontal decision-making that emerged at the barricades to the more vertical decision-making of the APPO Council and Sección 22. His account of the barricades echoes Esteva's claims of them becoming "autonomous focal points for social and political organizing" as well as the impact that these spaces of grassroots power have had on what David refers to as the "social fabric" vis-à-vis novel and strengthened social relations among

residents of the city's colonias. As we will see shortly, subsequent organizing efforts by movement youth seek to extend these social relations to greater Oaxcan society and political organizing.

During a discussion at CASOTA in February 2010, David again referred to the tensions between the horizontal and vertical structures within the APPO. He described an occasion when the APPO Council entered into negotiations with the government and offered to remove the barricades even though the government had yet to address any of the movement's demands. David explained:

People who claimed to speak on behalf of the Assembly told us [at the Brenamiel barricade] to let the ADO [private bus company] through because they had come to an agreement with them. *Ni madres* (fuck that) we told them! We took control of this street and they are not passing through here. If you want them to pass, give them what you have taken.

In November of 2006, following one of the more violent battles with federal police, the barricade of Cinco Señores produced a flyer that was distributed physically as well as online, addressing this same issue of the ongoing negotiations with the state. In it, the authors criticize the APPO Council for offering to remove the barricades without consulting the barricades as collective actors (Figure 24). The authors go on to acknowledge the need to negotiate with the state but denounce the fact that they were never consulted. We will see how these tensions between vertical organizing structure and autonomous youth continue to inform youth political culture in Oaxaca as represented in the projects of VOCAL and CASOTA.

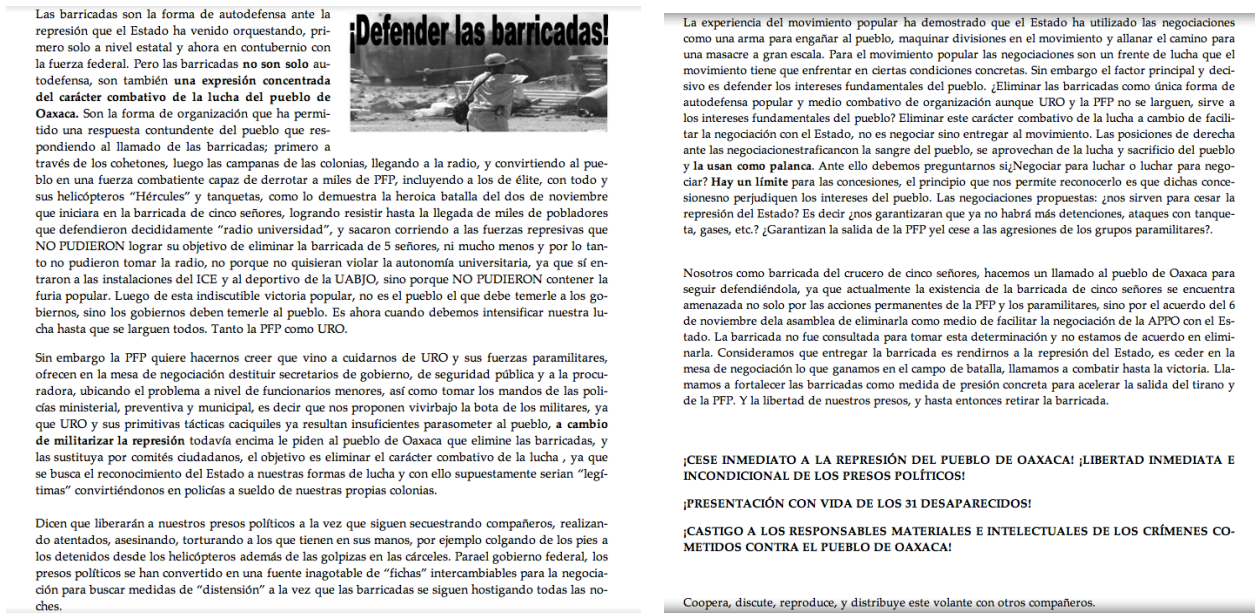


Figure 24: Flyer distributed by "Barricada Cinco Señores" in late October 2006

The physical and strategic overlap of the occupied radios and the barricades fostered a rich cross-fertilization between these social movement spaces, which sometimes led to people being introduced to the movement first through participation in the barricades and from there asking for airtime on the radio. The citywide network of barricades and occupied radio and television stations became symbols of the horizontal and grassroots power of the social movement (Esteva 2010). These spaces provided youth, woman, indigenous, urban poor, and other marginalized sectors of Oaxacan society important spaces for participation and visibility. The following transcription of an interview I conducted at a downtown café in 2010 with the young woman named Rosalía who I mention at the opening of this chapter, offers some substance to the dynamic between youth participation, radio and barricade spaces:

Maurice: Did you say that in 2006 you were at one of radios? Radio Universidad I think?

Rosalía: In various radios actually. It was like you guard Radio Oro and talk for a bit and then you left. Then you were at Radio Universidad<sup>37</sup>, which is where I spent more time but not inside the radio. I wasn't part of the programming, I had other issues to attend to. Actually I didn't know how to do too many things at the time and the banda that was there had already worked in radios and on top of that they were university students. So since they had a little knowledge of how to do everything, I did other things. And yes, at times I would speak and –

Maurice: What was that like for you?

Rosalía: No, I mean it was very hard for me because it was like- well to begin with the microphone is very imposing.

Maurice: You were 16 years old at the time?

Rosalía: Yes so there were some things I didn't understand, things I didn't quite comprehend. That was very difficult for me. I was coming from high school where although we covered social issues and looked at Marx, I couldn't manage to understand everything that was happening theoretically. I mean I did understand but only on a personal level, I couldn't explain things in the same words that the university students were using. And I mean they were university students majoring in sociology and law. So it was very difficult but we learned a lot there. I learned a great deal there. It was like the impetus.

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<sup>37</sup> Soon after the initial take over of radio stations, the movement disoccupied the commercial stations save for two- one of which was Radio Oro. In addition to these two, the movement maintained control of the university radio station, Radio Universidad.

Maurice: And how was it that they gave you the space on the radio? Did you say something to them or how did you end up with a microphone in front of you?

Rosalía: Well one day I went and I told them that I wanted to talk. There were a lot of us young people that had been at the barricades and there were some who were very young and they weren't very interested in hearing about theory, they were all about being in action but there were those of us that were interested beyond that. That was how we ended up saying "We need to ask for a space on the radio because we are also supporting by being at the barricade." We went, we spoke about what the situation was like for the youth [chavos] in the barricades. Many came from being graffiteros, from being skaters, others were street kids and that was how we started talking and how we went to ask for the space and we were able to be there. And they did give us the space because we were at the barricade of the university.

Maurice: So you were at the barricade of CU?

Rosalía: Yes, I was at the barricade of Brenamiel but I spent more time at the CU one. And we were actually at all of the barricades because I was with a friend who studied communications so I was always with him because he showed me- or at least I saw how he edited. We conducted interviews and he would tell me "Look you can cut this part" and that was also my introduction to editing and the radio and conducting interviews. So we would go from barricade to barricade conducting interviews [which were aired on the radio].

Rosalía's testimony about her varied participation in 2006 captures the overlapping ways that many people experienced and contributed to the social movement of 2006, as well as



the particularities of youth involvement. I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter that Rosalia participated in the research group based out of CASOTA. She is also a member of VOCAL, an alternative media collective, and is also active in promoting urban agriculture. These efforts will be explored in greater detail below, for now I want to draw attention to how she describes her introduction into the movement. She is a young high school student who feels intimidated by the political rhetoric of university students who are older and more educated than her. She and her friends find confidence and a sense of belonging within the larger social movement through their contributions as barricader@s, which some of them parlayed into participation in other aspects of the movement such as speaking on the radio as well as programming and editing.

Participation in the barricades continues to greatly inform the political subjectivities of barricader@s. Here David iterates as much, “For us, the barricade continues to be the call to action; it’s not me, him or her, rather it’s ‘being from the barricade of Brenamiel,’ and that continues to be reflected in the paintings of the graffiteros” (Esteva, Valencia and Venegas 2008:97). The importance of the barricades in informing youth spatial, social and political sensibilities will continue to be a central theme as I explore how the political culture that was being experimented with in the barricades permeated later projects.

### ***Youth Spaces 2006: ‘El Okupa’ and the Punk Movement***

Shortly after the appearance of the citywide network of barricades, a diverse group of youth who participated in various collectives and barricades took over an abandoned police station near the zócalo and created a youth-run social center. The space

served as a parallel yet autonomous space to the encampment in the zócalo and gave youth a more stable place to experiment with the politics and modes of socialization that were emerging in the barricades. Punks and other groups who identified as anarchist and libertarian were prominent protagonists in the creation and maintenance of this new space. In 2013 I was able to interview a longtime member in the punk movement in his home on the outskirts of the city about his participation in the social center.

He asked to be cited as *Mentes Liberadas*, which translates to *Liberated Minds*. I had been trying to meet up with him since 2010 with no luck, in part because he stays very busy working as an electrician, raising a family and staying active in the punk scene. However, I think the more significant reason for the delay was due to the fact that he and his fellow punks are very suspicious of strangers. I had been asking our mutual friend, Baldomero, questions about the occupied police station for almost five years now and I guess he was tired of answering my questions so he asked *Mentes* if he was interested in talking with me. After several missed or canceled meetings he told Baldomero to bring me to his house.

It was a Wednesday night in March around 8 when we arrived to his house. Baldomero knocked on the rusty corrugated aluminum gate and wondered out loud if this was the right house or if it was the next tree. A woman answered the knock, “*Quien?*” she asked. He responded with a name other than his given name, which I did not recognize. He said he was looking for such and such but the woman responded he was not home. Baldomero called *Mentes Liberadas* on his cell phone and found out that he and his wife were on their way home from taking their infant daughter who had come down with a fever to the hospital. We waited out on the street and watched several *mototaxis* pass by,

an elderly woman and her daughter spoke what sounded like Zapotec as they entered the *miscelánea* (corner store) across the street, shortly after they entered an middle-aged man with a beer-belly walked out with a case of Pacifico beer. Soon after the woman emerged from the corner store, a small dark colored Chevy Joy hatchback rolled up. A young dark-skinned man in his late twenties with what could be considered a slightly styled mullet and wearing a t-shirt and jeans got out, greeted Baldomero and opened the aluminum gate. After he pulled the car into the lot, Baldomero and I followed and closed the gate behind us. The lot was narrow and long, with dirt floors and 3 corrugated aluminum shacks in a row on the right and an open kitchen with aluminum roofing on the left and an outhouse built of cement bricks in the back corner.

The man came over and shook my hand and invited us in his home, which was the shack closest to the street. Meanwhile his wife, a young woman in her mid to late twenties with short spiky hair, facial and ear piercings and a large tattoo on her left arm stepped out of the hatchback with her infant bundled up in a blanket. We all walked into the home, which was a single room with a large bed and dresser on the left. There was mosquito-netting hanging over the bed but it was tied off to the side since it was not mosquito season. Along the back wall was a long table with two stools and a couple of plastic chairs. The home was humble but very well designed and taken care of. Mentas Liberadas dragged a large plastic storage chest to the center of the room and took the top off to display a huge archive of flyers, fanzines, stickers and patches he had collected over the years. He invited me to take a seat on one of the stools while Baldomero and his wife talked and laughed. I introduced myself to her and thanked both of them for inviting me to their home and asked about their little girl. "Pati," the mother of the child, assured

me that the baby was doing better now after catching a cold upon their return to Oaxaca from Mexico City where they had gone to attend a punk show the weekend prior. They laughed at the fact that the little girl, barely a year old, loved going to shows, where she bounced up and down to the aggressive music and sang along in her own way.

Baldomero explained to them that I had been working with such and such collectives over the past few years but that I was interested in hearing about the occupied police station. I learned afterwards that part of the “pitch” to Mentés Liberadas and his wife about meeting me was that I was a Chicano who also had the experience of being harassed by the police and being discriminated against- experiences that Baldomero and I had discussed over beers on a previous trip. To further legitimize my credentials, Baldomero assured them that my parents were Mexican and that I had lived in Mexico as a child and regularly came back. I found this out after the interview when I was talking with Pati and she asked me “You live over there but you are from Mexico too, right?” I gave the short answer that my dad was from Sonora, where I had lived as a child, but that my mom’s parents were actually from Cuba and Morocco and that I was born and had lived most of my life in the United States. Pati seemed unsure about how “Mexican” I was after that response, but nevertheless invited me to come back to their home and told me that there were archaeological ruins nearby that might interest me. This was a common invitation I have received over the years from people who imagine that as an anthropologist I must be interested in ruins.

I responded to Baldomero’s description of my interests by explaining that I was finishing my dissertation on youth activism in Oaxaca, I named some of the collectives I worked with and added that few had been able to tell me about what the day-to-day

existence of the social center they had established in 2006. Mentés Liberadas nodded his head and began:

We are from the punk movement...in the punk movement is where I actually found what I was looking for, which is an autonomous movement, a libertarian movement where there are no leaders, where I can contribute. Where I could build a fanzine, a flyer and distribute it, build a pamphlet and make it move. Where I expressed myself against something without the necessity of having to report my actions to anyone or having a leader who would tell me “Look, tomorrow we have to go to such and such place, we have to pay a certain amount and we have to take certain things.” It’s not like that. What I enjoyed was collective participation, getting together with various people, exchanging points of view about the things that actually mattered to us. And in doing so, none of us who were involved at the time were after power or profit where if we do this then the government will sit us down to negotiate and they will say to us “Here’s the deal, I will give you this amount of money, now go relax.” These were the things we didn’t want. Before 2006 we already had a participation since about 2001...

Maurice: How old were you when you began to get involved in the punk movement?

Mentés Liberadas: With the movement, in 2000 ...I was 16 or 17 years old.

I followed by asking him if he was from the colonia that he currently lived in and he insisted that he had lived there for a long time and that he could show me photographs of what the area looked like before. Here, Baldomero interrupted for the first time and asked Mentés Liberadas, “Both of your parents are Mazatecos from the Sierra Mazateca aren’t

they? They migrated to the city when you were younger?” He responded that yes they were from the Mazateca but he had lived a long time in the colonia.

Mentes Liberadas began his testimony speaking about collectivity and belonging. He makes clear that the punk movement is not just about a particular aesthetic or music but that it is about social and political participation. He stressed this point frequently, using the word *participación* (participation) and the phrase *tener una participación* (to have a participation) repeatedly during our 2.5-hour interview. He spent a lot of time talking about his early involvement in the punk movement and various collectives like Centro Social Libertario<sup>38</sup> (Social Libertarian Center or CESOL) pre-2006. He was making clear that his political participation did not begin in 2006 and that the space opened by the punk movement for youth like himself to participate on their own terms, with an imposed agenda or leadership were key aspects of what attracted him to the punk movement.

After establishing this brief history of the punk movement and his place within it, he moved on to discussing his participation on June 14, 2006, which I cite in Chapter III. He talked about helping the teachers fight off the police and reclaim the space out of desperation from being victimized by the police over the years. Several punks I have spoken with in Oaxaca have shared their stories of being regular targets of police brutality because of the way they dress and look. Mentes Liberadas discussed the validation the punk movement earned following confrontations with police in the context of the social movement:

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<sup>38</sup> CESOL is one of the libertarian groups that has been more active in Oaxaca over the past decade and is composed largely of punks. They have been active in the publication of fanzines, organizing punk concerts and mobilizing in support political prisoners, among other work.

At that point, once we recovered the zócalo, we began running into various banda and there began to be a restructuring where we said, “Right now everyone can’t be running around on their own because the teachers are here, the organizations are here, the people from el pueblo are also ready to jump, we can’t sit around as spectators.” Especially with the experiences we had. We said, “We already have experiences, we have a political project, we feel like we can do something.” That was when we began organizing and we built our encampment there [the zócalo]. This was at the time that the teachers said that after June 14 it was no longer a teachers’ movement, instead it was now a popular movement, a movement of el pueblo. They hadn’t just touched the teachers, but now they had touched el pueblo and now it was el pueblo that was against the government. So it was there that we began to organize and have a participation.

So once we dedicated ourselves completely, put our encampment together, we began to organize ourselves internally to figure out what kind of participation we were going to have, how we were going to do things, and what were the objectives of showing up and putting our encampment there. That was how the banda decided to set up an information booth with [information] about all that was happening.

So once we built our encampment and began to organize ourselves internally we told the teachers and the people from the organizations that they were not alone, that we were there with them. All of the teachers in the state were there, all 70,000 of them so we talked to them and explained to them what our movement was about, what we were doing and why we were there. We did this in

part because they would stare at us at first asking themselves “What’s up with those vandals?” And before the movement everyone looked at us like, “What’s are those fools up to?” But since the battles with police they saw that the ones who didn’t think twice about jumping into the confrontations were the youth... After that it was like we earned some respect. The movement earned the respect of the teachers and the people that were there, from the organizations. They thanked us for having helped them. And once we had our encampment they would come around and ask us if they could come to us if something happened, if we could support them with that part, with security.

As occurs with barricader@s later in the movement, the youth who participated in the initial battle with police to reclaim the zócalo earned a newfound respect among their elders by being viewed as a popular security force. This is especially pertinent when it comes to punks, graffiteros and other criminalized youth who were already used to being on the receiving end of police violence but were not use to having battles with the police be reason for validation and legitimization by teachers and other elders.

Participants in the youth encampment belonged to various collectives, such as CESOL, Colectivo Resistencia Anti-Tortura Animal (Anti-Animal Torture Resistance or RATA<sup>39</sup>) and Colectivo Ácrata (an anarchist collective established by high school students), as well as youth with no previous affiliations to organized spaces or collectives. In addition to the teachers, their neighbors in the zócalo included activists from organizations such as Consejo Indígena Popular de Oaxaca (Popular Indigenous Council of Oaxaca or CIPO), Frente Amplio de Lucha Popular (Broad Front of Popular

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<sup>39</sup> Also play on words since rata is Spanish for rat, making them the RAT Collective.



Struggle or FALP), Frente Popular Revolucionario (Popular Revolutionary Front or FPR), and Consejo de Defensa de los Derechos del Pueblo (Council for the Defense of the Rights of the Pueblo or CODEP). Surrounded by formal organizations, the anarchist and libertarian youth decided they needed to have a unified banner for their encampment, related projects and activities. Through an assembly they picked the initials B.A.R.L.- Bloque Autónomo de Resistencia Libertaria (Autonomous Block of Libertarian Resistance).

BARL formed part of the larger encampment's security unit (Area de Seguridad del Platón) and was given official Sección 22 ID badges identifying them as security. This facilitated their movement to and from the encampment, as well as their participation in regular rounds of security checks of barricades throughout the city as well as of Radio Universidad located on the UABJO campus. Their new status as card-carry members of the security team opened other doors as well. Mentos Liberadas recalled:

Once we had a more active participation, once we committed ourselves completely to the encampment in the zócalo, we began to participate with the teachers, with those at the university, the ones with the radio. That is how we came to ask for a space on Radio Universidad. Once we had a name for the organization and once we had ID badges, we gained access to spaces.

Maurice: When was that more or less? In July, August?

Mentos Liberadas: I think it was July when we entered the radio. They would give us, I don't know, 2 hours and the time was for those of us in BARL. Those of us that had time, that had the chance, we would go to CU and broadcast.

Mentes Liberadas' wife Pati recalled with excitement how she used to tune into the "Punk show" while she worked at her job at a beauty salon. She and Mentes Liberadas were not together at the time and her older brother warned her she could get in trouble if she got carried away with her sympathies towards *los appos*.<sup>40</sup> Baldomero also got very excited recalling the radio show and how older people would call in and request certain punk songs because they liked the message of social uplift. In addition to the music, BARL members used their airtime to speak about issues such as discrimination against punks, racism, and women's rights. Mentes Liberadas said they received a lot of calls from people who wanted to discuss these issues, as well as people calling to give the youth words of support. Once again we see the richness of interactions between the more horizontal spaces of the 2006, such as the barricades and radio in empowering youth activists.

Tied to their radio show, BARL organized a music concert on campus where they collected donations. They opened the space to "all kinds of music, not just punk. So long as they contributed to the liberation of people and not slavery." Ska, reggae, rock and punk bands played and the cover charge was one kilo of food. BARL had decided that the donations would go to a delegation of teachers at the encampment. After the show they took the donated food to the *zócalo* and donated it to one of the delegations from one of the more remote and marginalized areas in the state, the Sierra Mixe<sup>41</sup>. I asked Mentes Liberadas why they chose teachers from the Sierra Mixe:

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<sup>40</sup> *Los appos* is a disparaging way to refer to presumed members of the APPO

<sup>41</sup> The Sierra Mixe is located in the mountains of Northeastern Oaxaca. The Mixe or *ayuuikjä'äy* as they refer to themselves, are said to be "unconquered" because they

Since they weren't from a central place, where they could for example, easily go home and find food. They came from communities that were very remote, so them being at the encampment showed that they were fully committed. Their salaries had also been suspended so a little food would treat them very well and help them be OK. That's how we decided that in our view, the ones from the Sierra Mixe needed the help. It was all good, we went, we gave them the food, we explained what organization we were with and how we had collected all the food. They said, "Thank you boys." It also served as a connection with them because they were organizing in their communities, the people in the pueblos they represented. Committees would come from their communities and bring them five hundred tamales, they would come in a truck and say "Here are five hundred tamales from Ayutla. Here are two boxes of bananas from such and such place." They would send them various things and then they would say "Go send twenty tamales to the ones from BARL," " Send them some fruit." So it was like a connection.

Around the same time BARL was making connections such as these with elders through the radio and fundraising, they held a youth meeting in the zócalo where they decided to occupy the abandoned state police station nearby. The objective was to "create an alternative, cultural, autonomous, self-organized space" for youth (OIR 2006a).

Baldomero was present at the meeting and described it to me during an interview in 2010:

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successful resisted conquest by the Spanish, the Aztecs and the Zapotecs. Today the region is one of the most marginalized in the state.

Everything was happening in and around the zócalo...at the beginning only the teachers were there, but then other organizations started to arrive and establish themselves at the encampment so that they could not be removed. That was when the *chavos* [kids] I was working with entered. They entered, began setting up their tarps and tents and started staying there. I would visit them everyday and see what was happening there. We would go and put up posters and flyers about what was happening, keeping people informed...it was through this that one day they had a meeting and they said, “There is a police station two blocks from the zócalo. We want to enter and create a squat [*una casa ocupada*]. They call it an Okupa. “Whose down? Who’s coming with? We are going to enter. We are going to break the locks. We are going to enter because the place is abandoned. They say the place belongs to el pueblo, because it belongs to the government, so it belongs to el pueblo.” And they did it, they entered and set up the Okupa.

They called their new collective Ocupación Intercultural en Resistencia (herein OIR, which also means to listen), and referred to the space as the Okupa, thus positioning their project in the global context of the Okupa Movement, which is what the squatting movement is called in Spain and Latin America. Mentés Liberadas explained that once the decision was made to occupy the old police station, they distributed flyers and announcements on the radio informing the rest of the movement of their intentions to abandon their encampment in the zócalo and focus on the new space. Once they entered the building, cleaned up the space and restored electricity and plumbing, they invited people from the zócalo and organizations to use the Okupa, to come even if just to use the restroom, kitchen or if they wanted a place to rest indoors.



Figure 25: Courtyard of Okupa. Photo credit: Baldomero Robles.



Figure 26: Mural and Anarchist Flag in Okupa Courtyard. Photo credit: Baldomero Robles

Soon after the occupation of the building, OIR held an assembly where they discussed what each room and space was going to be used for. Youth establishes a surprisingly large number of projects as a part of the Okupa. An anarchist collective that predated the social movement set up a popular library, mostly containing anarchist texts and fanzines. A group of punks set up a silk-screening workshop where they produced

stickers, patches, posters and flyers (see Figure 27). OIR also set up a popular food kitchen where anyone could eat for free. Youth would go to the local markets and collect donations from vendors, which were usually produce that was bruised or overly ripe but could still be cooked. The central patio was used for holding *tianguis* (flea market) where people would barter items and sell crafts made by political prisoners. The patio was also used for holding concerts. Artisans set up a workshop where they made Oaxacan folk art figurines called *alebrijes*<sup>42</sup> out of recycled materials. There was also a sound room for recording music or other audio. Finally, another project that was undertaken was the use of the space as a dormitory for people visiting from rural communities, for the homeless, and for anyone else seeking shelter.



Figure 27: Stickers and patches made in the Okupa workshop. Photo credit: Baldomero Robles

<sup>42</sup> Alebrijes have become synonymous with Oaxacan folk art and an important commodity in the tourist market of Oaxaca.

Mentes Liberadas recalled that once they had the space functional, they organized a publicity event to introduce the space to folks from the surrounding barricades and encampments. The event was a *calenda*, which is a traditional Oaxacan procession with music, dancing and fireworks that usually leads people to the site of a party:

So we organized a calenda from the tourist walkway down to the zócalo, through the encampment and to the Okupa. The point was to have everyone join the calenda, follow it to the space and have everyone enter. At that time we already had the popular kitchen running so as a way to introduce everyone to it, we organized a dinner for all of the *raza*. We told them, “You know what, this is the popular kitchen and our objective is to keep it running so we can have an area where the raza can come and eat. If you would like to support with anything you might have, like a tomato or some loose change, that’s great. If not, no problem”...so the calenda arrives, we feed everyone, including people from the colonias, from organizations, from the encampment, teachers. And from there we asked everyone to join us for a tour of the space, and it was a very large space so we showed them each room and what we were going to use it for. We gave them a tour of the space, we said “Look, here is the workshop where the artisans will make alebrijes out of wire” and days beforehand the guys had made 2 or 3 things to show the people what we were going to do. People said “Wow, this is interesting.” We told them, these workshops are for children from this age to that age, or this workshop is for people of all ages. By that time we also had 2 speakers that had been donated to us so we told them “You know what, this space right here is the sounds room. Right now all we have is 2 speakers, but as we

continue working we will go collecting more things.” Other guys had set up a garden and they had already sowed 2 or 3 plants so there was something to show the people, to show them here are the fruits [of our labor]. That we were working towards something. For the silk-screening workshop we had already set up the screens and everything so we showed the public everything we had done and show them all of the spaces.

After that we began the workshops. I remember some of the artisans began giving workshops to kids of how to make alebrijes out of wire and all of that. And I witnessed the participation of the kids, 4 kids used to go, 2 boys and 2 girls. They would go to their workshops and at that moment, the Okupa was functioning.

The pride with which Mentos Liberadas spoke about showing the fruits of their labor to the rest of “the people” was palpable, as was the joy of having children involved through art workshops. Through his testimony and through the manifesto, which was distributed as a flyer during the first days of the occupation (Figure 28),<sup>43</sup> it is clear that the Okupa was conceived of as a space where participants could seize the momentum of the popular movement and contribute to the creation of a more inclusive and participatory society. The desire for such spaces of inclusion can be understood in large part because of youths’ own experiences of marginalization and criminalization. When describing the space they chose for the Okupa, they describe it as “an abandoned building that for many years served as the municipal police station. Arrested in the streets, in raids on music concerts, only because of our manner of dress, for our age and for our rebelliousness, many of us

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<sup>43</sup> For full text of manifesto see Appendix A



were arrested and beaten by the Municipal Police who were stationed here in this space” (OIR 2006b). As with youth participation in the barricades and during confrontations with police, we see the impact that being harassed by police can have in shaping the political subjectivities of criminalized youth.



Figure 28: Scanned image OIR Okupa flyer (front and back). Photo credit. Baldomero Robles

OIR also positioned itself as a youth project following the examples of struggles for social justice set out by their elders, of indigenous communal life and organization, and as a generation that has been shaped by the presence of the Zapatistas and La Otra Campaña, which is among the groups that the collective addresses in the manifesto. The collective positions itself as part of the 2006 social movement, while declaring through

their words and actions that youth need their own spaces within the movement to practice their emerging politics.

Baldomero's recollection of the logic behind the Okupa, of the space belonging "to el pueblo because it belongs to the government," reflects their reclaiming of the building based on a collective right as pueblo, and not based on legal claims of ownership. This is consistent with Lefebvre's notion of Right to the City (Lefebvre 1968; Mitchell 2003), which has been expanded by Holston (2008), and others to include the notion of urban citizenship. Urban citizenship is an especially useful concept here because it encompasses collective claims based on urban residence and privileges use value over exchange value (Carpio et al. 2011). This of course is a logic that is enacted by the teachers' union when they set up their encampment every year and that the social movement exercises by talking over public space. This will again be central in our discussion of youth spaces and activist spaces post-2006 (Chapters VI-IX). The idea of urban citizenship is explicitly articulated in the collective's manifesto:

*OKUPAR* (To occupy): Is a way of being and thinking about things and of disagreeing with the system, denouncing the abuses of power and proposing an alternative in the face of that which you do not agree with, OKUPAR is to say NO to capitalism, which excludes those who do not dance to its tune. We don't want to work to live, we want to live for self-empowerment, we don't want to mortgage our entire lives in order say this is mine. OKUPAR is to say no to authorities, no to hierarchies, it's to say you have worth because of what you are and not because of what you own. OKUPAR is the love the struggle for free spaces where we can grow, fulfill ourselves and create.

OKUPAR, is a practical alternative way of life in the present.

For all of the above reasons, we have decided to OKUPAR AN  
ABANDONED BUILDING and give it life.

The Okupa lasted from August-November of 2006; while relatively short lived, the experience proved to be a formative one as participants of the Okupa went on to form several autonomous cultural and political projects. The popular library that was set up would be expanded in subsequent years and reopened as a used bookstore in downtown Oaxaca- one of the few places that inexpensive books are available in the city. Other participants would go on to form or join VOCAL and CASOTA (described below), while others would open a communal house for anarko-punks. One area of tension within OIR was how to deal with the presence of drug users who used the space for getting high but did not contribute to the project. I also learned from barricader@s that this was an issue in the barricades, particularly with adolescent street kids. These tensions speak to the difficulty of practicing a politics of inclusiveness and the creation of open spaces. Staying true to their anti-authoritarian. Ultimately, the large-scale deployment of the PFP in late October forced youth to abandon the Okupa in favor of reinforcing the barricades guarding the university and the university radio.



Figure 29: "Jovenes de Okupa" [Okupa Youth]. Photo credit: Baldomero Robles.<sup>44</sup>

### ***Conclusion***

The social movement of 2006 provided many novel spaces like the one provided through the occupied zócalo, the barricades, the occupied radio stations and the Okupa, where novel relationships were made. Many of them continue to be expanded and strengthened through a network of autonomous youth collectives that emerged from the experiences of youth participation in the movement. They regularly collaborate across space and difference building on relationship that were forged in these spaces of 2006. For example, as we will see in Chapters VI and IX youth political collectives and street art collectives offer free community radio and art workshops in indigenous communities that have reached out to them after having the experience of mobilizing together in 2006.

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<sup>44</sup> The phrase being painted in this mural is part of a text issued by Subcomandante Marcos of the EZLN that reads “*odam, aquí la vos nos hace y alienta; pame, aquí ya no el silencio*” ([Tohono-O’]odam, here the voice creates us and gives us breath; pame, no more silence here).

Moreover, participation in these emergent social spaces during 2006 continues to greatly inform the political subjectivities of youth. As we will see in the following chapters, the horizontal political culture that was being experimented with in the barricades permeates current projects. Even though the barricades and social movement spaces of 2006 have important material functions, it is also important to highlight the cultural and social importance that they have left on the people that produced those spaces. This is something which social movement scholars have difficulty capturing- the impacts that social movements can have on the subjectivities of local actors and everyday social changes, which I argue can be made visible if we focus on the physical and social constitution of space as a window into the multiple ways that power and resistance are enacted, contested and negotiated.

## CHAPTER VI

### URBAN YOUTH COLLECTIVES: LABORATORIES FOR EVERYDAY ACTIVISM

It was a brisk and clear November evening in 2010 when I arrived at CASOTA for my first *Geopolitica* meeting. I was invited by members of the collective VOCAL earlier in the week to participate in their research group on development projects and land struggles in Oaxaca. On this day, we were to discuss how to most effectively respond to requests from community leaders in the Zapotec town of San Jose del Progreso to contribute a research report on the long-term effects that mining has on communities. As was often the case, I showed up before most of my collaborators, so I waited in the courtyard of CASOTA talking with Rosalía, a twenty-year-old orthodontic student from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec who formed part of the *Geopolitica* group. What was usually a space dominated by Oaxacan youth from the city's colonias had been dramatically different in recent weeks. I stood under the guava tree talking with Rosalía about her recent invitation to collaborate with Tanzanian farmers and Swedish activists as part of a Swedish "free-school" project. We watched as two small children kicked rocks in the courtyard, two others chased each other around, and yet another sat mesmerized on the floor as he traced a stick over the cement as if it were a brush and he was completing his *magnum opus*. Near this child a young woman in a long red huipil swept the floor, another nursed an infant, and three others sat in plastic chairs chatting in their native Triqui.

The woman and children were part of the Encampment of Displaced Woman and Children of San Juan Copala who had been occupying a corner of the Oaxacan zócalo for several months in protest of the paramilitary siege of their municipality, San Juan Copala, which had declared itself autonomous in January of 2007. The woman and children of the encampment began a hunger strike in September but were later evicted by local government in the ritual “cleansing” of the zócalo ahead of festivities. In this case the event was Dia de los Muertos, which brings national and international tourists who come to see the altars, sugar skulls and folklore, not the discord and nonconformity of protesters. The woman and children from Copala would eventually relocate their encampment to the Santo Domingo church, but before they were able to negotiate the relocation they took up residence at CASOTA. Youth who had come together during the social movement of 2006, took seriously the need to build relationships with indigenous villages in Oaxaca based on solidarity, mutual aid and horizontality. CASOTA, as an activist space in the center of Oaxaca City, came to embody these, and many other relationships forged by youth since 2006, such as those with Tanzanian farmers and Swedish activists mentioned above.

### ***Youth Cultural and Political Activism in Urban Oaxaca***

In this chapter I build on the history of 2006 laid out in the previous chapter by considering how two youth collectives, CASOTA and VOCAL, emerged out of the experiences of youth participation in the social movement. By tracing the formation of these two influential youth collectives, I demonstrate how social movements’ cultural impacts are often the legacies that are most directly felt in the everyday lives of

marginalized communities. I do so by considering how the political cultures and subjectivities being experimented with by youth activists are directly linked to their experiences in 2006.

In the months following the violent disarticulation of the popular movement by the PFP and the subsequent campaign of repression, various sectors within the movement convened in order to assess possible paths forward. The APPO held a statewide assembly on February 10-11, 2007 where members discussed the upcoming local elections and whether or not to support opposition candidates or field candidates under a separate APPO party. Likewise, youth from various barricades and some that had participated in the Okupa and had previously participated in organizations, held a series of meetings at UNITIERRA, a Zapatista-inspired practice-based learning space in the city, to discuss their role in the movement's future. Uneasy about rumors that were circulating ahead of the statewide assembly that prominent currents within the APPO wanted to enter into elections, youth began to formulate their own political project.

The project that emerged from meeting of barricader@s in early 2007 was VOCAL, one of the most visible and active youth collectives in Oaxaca today and includes barricader@s Sílvia, Rosalía and David who have been cited in the previous chapters. In 2008, other youth who had participated in the movement formed CASOTA, a cultural and political center in downtown Oaxaca. In this chapter, I consider how social movements can impact political cultures and future activism by looking at how youth participation in 2006 informed the creation of VOCAL and CASOTA and has been expanded upon through these projects. In Chapter VII, I will analyze specific actions the



collective has performed in order to ground my arguments related to the need to reassess social movement temporality and impact.

### ***Youth Spaces Post-2006: VOCAL***

As the name of VOCAL implies (Oaxacan Voices Constructing Autonomy and Liberty), the collective is built around libertarian principles, the construction of autonomy as both political objective and practice, and a multivocality that is grounded in a collective identity of being Oaxacan. In the following excerpt from our interview, Rosalía shares her memories of the formation of VOCAL:

Maurice: How did you become part of VOCAL?

Rosalía: In 2006, I met a lot of banda, many, many of them at the barricades and we became great friends (*compisimas*). Later, in 2007, we got together again and asked, so after the social movement, they are going to enter the elections? The APPO, well one group from the APPO wanted to enter the upcoming elections. So we agreed in February of 2007, we agreed that we didn't want to enter into the elections. There weren't so many people murdered, so many political prisoners, so many disappeared, so that we could enter into elections! So we decided that we had to form something, we needed to do something with ourselves, and do it ourselves. That is when and how we formed VOCAL and we began to connect with even *more* people.

Maurice: And what was that process like? You didn't have a space like CASOTA at the time, so where did you meet and how did you communicate with each other?

Rosalía: To begin with, you already know your banda. You already knew what they were thinking. You knew more or less what they wanted. At the very least you knew what they didn't want, that we have very clear. So when we started to see each other again we were like, "Hey such and such is happening in the assembly. What do you think about it?" "I think that we have to organize ourselves." "Yeah I think so too, we have to do something." And that how it went, asking all of the banda about our concerns and saying, we are doing this, join us. And we didn't have a space like we do now. The repression was very bad but we got together at a space that some friends had. They had a space in a house that belonged to an organization that is called CIPO.<sup>45</sup> So we had our meetings there, they opened the space to us. Later we searched for other spaces, but not just to stay there, rather [we looked for] spaces of our own. Then there was another space that belonged to another collective, and later we met in another house that belonged to yet another collective until the banda created our own space, which is what is now CASOTA.

After heated debates surrounding the upcoming municipal elections, the APPO assembly decided to stick to the founding principles of the movement and abstain from electoral politics. Those organizations and individuals that chose to participate were free to do so, but were not to use the name of the APPO in their campaigns. Although the APPO's ultimate decision in regards to the upcoming elections was the outcome that youth were

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<sup>45</sup> CIPO is a Magonista organization with an organizing presence in Oaxaca and Canada. CIPO youth participated in the Okupa, and some left CIPO and joined VOCAL in 2007. Magonistas are followers of the anarchism proposed by Oaxacan brother Ricardo and Enrique Flores Magón in the 1910-20s. Magonismo had a strong presence in both Mexico and the U.S. with its emphasis on self-governance resonating with many indigenous communities and their existing traditions of governance.

calling for, they were still uneasy about the “opportunism” they saw within the movement and the lack of voice they had in the APPO assembly. One exception was the presence of David, who was chosen as an APPO delegate from his barricade and later was one of the founding members of VOCAL. David was the exception, however, so youth decided that they needed to create their own space for social and political participation, independent of political parties and outside of the APPO assembly.

In March of 2007, VOCAL publically distributed its manifesto (see Appendix B), which introduced the collective to the public and outlined their political vision. In the following excerpt, VOCAL identifies itself as the product of political diversity and articulates the collective’s position vis-à-vis the APPO and political parties:

Those of us who currently make up this space are autonomous individu@s [individuals] libertarian collectives, self-organized spaces, antiauthoritarian people, Magonista organizations, Zapatista collectives, anarchist groups, barricaderos and barricaderas, and members of the APPO and algun@s [some] members of La Otra Campaña. Tod@s [All] are activists from the current social movement in Oaxaca.

This space is created as a means of bringing together the autonomous efforts of the mobilized pueblo of Oaxaca, those of us that actively participate in the social movement, both as a part of and apart from organizing structures such as the popular assembly of the peoples of Oaxaca (APPO) and those of us who find it important to keep our social movement faithful to its principles, autonomous and independent of political parties and reclaiming the assembly form as the most just and harmonious means by which to come to understand

ourselves, to self-organize and to self-govern, where the people's accords are not based on the competition of majorities against minorities, nor in other forms of imposition commonly exerted by those in power, but rather, in a relationship of mutual respect among all parts of el pueblo (Vocal 2007b).

Explicit in the manifesto is the collective's insistence on remaining autonomous from political parties and an outright rejection of electoral politics. Autonomy is an important principle in the political visions of groups like VOCAL and CASOTA but it refers to more than being independent of political parties. Again I refer to VOCAL activist Daniel's definition of autonomy:

I see autonomy as that capacity or ability to make the necessary decisions that guide life in our communities. That within ourselves exists the capacity to analyze, reflect, debate and decide what needs to be done. That it not be external factors telling us what needs to be done in order to live well as they define it- be they government, political party, or business.

Autonomy as interpreted by Daniel is about self-determination and the right to be free from domination- be it state, capitalist or otherwise. During a discussion at CASOTA in 2009, VOCAL activist David offered his own definition of autonomy:

Autonomy...is relationships- it is not something that can be seen like the town hall of a pueblo. Autonomy is a way of being and of relating to others that begins, in my opinion, from a point of rupture. It is to say 'We don't want to be subjugated by the government and by the rich' and then comes the 'Yes' and the 'yeses' are multiple because we construct them in different ways, in the

[indigenous] communities, in the city's popular neighborhoods, in the schools and in the factories- although there are very few of those in Oaxaca.

Through these two definitions of autonomy we can see that youth are imagining their autonomous projects in political, social, and economic terms. They are imagining alternatives to the suppression of diversity represented by capitalism and the “majoritarian politics” of the electoral system. Importantly, autonomy for them is a dynamic, relational process that is enacted. We will continue to see how VOCAL and CASOTA understand and practice their own version of autonomy through their political projects.

The politics outlined in the manifesto can be seen as: 1) the response of youth who felt marginalized or alienated by their experiences vis-à-vis the formal organizing spaces of 2006 that were controlled by the APPO; and 2) an effort to build on these youths' experiences of participating in the horizontal organizing spaces from 2006 like the barricades, the Okupa and the occupied radio stations. Their political vision is thus informed by their collective experiences of participation in the social movement of 2006 as well as their own understandings of how communal law works in Oaxaca's indigenous communities as evidenced by their desire to “reclaim the assembly form” of self-governance.

VOCAL articulates a collective subject constructed out of diversity, without attempting to impose a unitary character, identity or politics. For example, VOCAL does not posit itself as an anarchist collective or a class-based organization. Rather, they attempt to create a space inclusive of diverse political and social bases. On a return visit to Oaxaca in 2013, I was told by a member of VOCAL that there was actually much

debate when they were writing the manifesto and picking a name for their new collective, specifically about the label “Oaxacan” in the name VOCAL because of concerns by some that this would exclude allies that were from other states and even other countries.

Consensus was eventually reached that identifying as Oaxacan was a significant aspect of the political subjectivities of members and that this did not necessarily preclude connecting with others. The fact that there was considerable debate surrounding this aspect of their project, however, is evidence of the importance they place on creating spaces and projects of inclusion.

During an interview conducted at CASOTA in 2010, I asked Daniel about what it has been like working alongside groups with vertical organizing structures:

Maurice: What has it been like for you or for the collectives in which you participate to organize alongside people that bring with them a distinct way of organizing, with leadership and hierarchies? What has that been like for you collectively?

Daniel: That would be the organic or structural part of the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca. That is where you might say that was mostly formed by people that were already organized by organizations that have been around for many years. Many of them already had the vices that were taking shape here in Oaxaca. It’s a way of interacting that is very complicated, in part because it was such a wide spectrum of organizations that were found within the organizing structure within the APPO.

Anyhow, what we tried to do and what we keep trying to do, is to stay faithful to the principles of the movement: No negotiating with the government;

No participating in political parties; and seeking profound change. These are things that do not agree with the agendas of the more visible members of the organizations. It has been a give-and-take within the assembly but ultimately the consensus has been to stay faithful to the principles of the movement, at least in formally.

Maurice: Do you feel you as a collective have had a space within the assembly or that they have let your voice be heard?

Daniel: That space was earned through popular mobilization. That is to say that at a certain point the APPO as a structure opened up to el pueblo due to the mobilizing power of el pueblo. Perhaps not in the way we would have liked but there were certain spaces. Some of us have tried to keep those spaces open within that structure but nevertheless we do not view the APPO as a structure as being the most important phase of the struggle. Many of us feel that we are APPO more because we share that desire and struggle to transform things. I think that is what we share with a lot of people, including those that were not organized before 2006. We found we have more in common with the kind of people that came out to the streets spontaneously because of that same desire [to transform things].

When Daniel speaks of the “vices” entrenched in more established organizations within the APPO, he is referring to that complicated history discussed in Chapter III of authoritarian clientelism whereby the Mexican government fosters or co-opts those organized sectors that it finds politically useful and represses those that are not (Fox 1994). This strategy has given rise to a particular political culture where certain groups know that if they mobilize their membership the government will likely offer them

economic and political concessions. Depending on the organization, the concessions may or may not be distributed among the bases. The Oaxacan teachers' union is an emblematic case of an organization that actually has to mobilize its base annually in order to have their contracts negotiated but there are other groups where the concessions do not necessarily benefit the base. For example, Daniel offered as an example of these "vices" a Marxist-Leninist organization that he alleges commandeers buses and then releases them for money. For many of the more radical currents that participated in the social movement of 2006, however, any form of negotiation with the government has come to be seen as synonymous to co-optation and "selling out." Many VOCAL and CASOTA activists share such a perspective, which unfortunately does not offer many routes out of conflicts with the state.

Daniel's critique of the vertical structure of opposition groups resonates with the politics of other youth collectives in Oaxaca. Mentos Liberadas had a similar critique when he explained the appeal of the punk movement like not "having to report my actions to anyone or having a leader who would tell me" what to do and instead "getting together with various people, exchanging points of view about the things that actually mattered to us." Whereas Mentos Liberadas began organizing as part of the punk movement, Daniel's political formation actually began when he was a high school student in Mexico City. Growing up in what many consider "one of the world's most infamous slums," Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl (Vallarino 2002:536) Daniel attended a high school that was part of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). In 1999 UNAM students declared a campus-wide strike, took over the campus and effectively shut down the university for nearly a year in "defense of the free public



university and against neoliberal policies in Mexico” (RedeZ 2009). Daniel participated in the student movement alongside his older brother who studied at the UNAM. Together with thousands of other youth and sympathetic professors, they experienced one of the first attacks by the newly formed PFP, who laid siege on the campus (Arrellano Chávez 2010).

Daniel is the son of migrants from the Mixteca region of Oaxaca and has maintained regular connections with the town and his extended family there. He actually participated in the social movement of 2006, not as part of an organization or group of youth, but with people from his parents town in the Mixteca. He continued to go back and forth between Oaxaca and Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl until joining VOCAL in 2007. He joined after repeatedly running in to youth at political events who he recognized from 2006 that had since formed VOCAL and invited him to participate with the collective.

In any political project, there are of course limits to inclusiveness. In the following excerpt Daniel explains his and his peers emerging political visions, which incorporate various historical and present-day influences. In doing so he teases out some of the nuances between adhering to a politics of inclusion and diversity, and organizing with groups with very different political visions:

Maurice: Do you follow any particular political philosophy?

Daniel: I don't self-identify with a particular name or ideology or philosophy or way of thinking. Nevertheless I do coincide in many ways with libertarian ideas. I can be, I don't know, Magón, Zapata, the proposals that were made during the most recent revolution [the Mexican Revolution of 1910-20]. I coincide with that but also with a long history of struggle by indigenous peoples [*pueblos indios*]

that goes back hundreds of years as well as the many attempts at nonviolent uprisings throughout Latin America over the past century. I think there is agreement, more than anything in the practice of struggle.

Maurice: So not so much with any particular political current but with historical struggles? And what has it been like then, to organize side-by-side with groups that adhere more strictly to a particular political line, like Leninism or Marxism, and for whom there is only one correct way to struggle?

Daniel: Well I suppose I could say that I identify at a certain level, not a purely theoretically level, but as far as philosophies I do coincide with the struggle for autonomy. And that is based more than anything in the life practices, the way of life of indigenous peoples and communities. These are the values or principles that I fight for. And I think that the diversity that we represent as a movement is also part of those values. I don't think of the struggle for autonomy as a hegemonic struggle that rejects other worldviews. Likewise, I don't think that autonomy needs to be suppressed by other ways of explaining the situation that we are living. Along those lines there is fraternal dialogue with Marxist compañeros (comrades) who agree with the principles of the movement. We acknowledge that we don't coincide in our political stances but we have practically the same motives of [seeking] social transformation. So that doesn't mean that we distance ourselves from them. But there are other kinds of people that call themselves Marxists but I don't view them that way because these are people that have betrayed these principles [by] negotiating with the government, so dialogue with them is not possible.

VOCAL frequently organizes or participates in events with groups with whom they have differences but with whom they believe they share a common goal of creating a more just and equitable society. One of the few cardinal sins for them is if a group or individual is thought to have received concessions from the government “under the table,” such as the Marxist-Leninist group who is said to practice the release of commandeered buses in exchange for money.

Much like the OIR manifesto, the VOCAL manifesto and subsequent texts make use of the gender inclusive ‘@’ instead of the masculine ‘o’ in pronouns, thus challenging gender designations in the Spanish language that assume a universal male subject (Stephen 2013). For example, “Todos” becomes “Tod@s” and “algunos” becomes “algun@s.” In many ways, VOCAL builds on the visions and politics that began to emerge in the spaces of the barricades and the OIR Okupa in 2006. The continuities are apparent in various realms, which can be observed in the projects that have been constructed by VOCAL and OIR, as well as through the 2 collectives’ manifestos.

In addition to challenging gender designations, both collectives’ manifestos revindicate communal practices found in indigenous communities in Oaxaca—specifically, the practice of communal labor through *tequio*, and governance through the communal assembly. It follows that OIR and VOCAL assert a total rejection of electoral politics while embracing inclusive political and social visions that value diversity (understood broadly). There is a similar critique of the existing economic and political systems but VOCAL seems to go even further than OIR in laying out a political vision that is based on their understanding of autonomy which emphasizes process and the construction of horizontal connections with other groups engaged in struggles for

autonomy. This emphasis on horizontal connections between groups speaks to the significant presence of adherents of the Zapatista's *La Otra Campaña* (The Other Campaign), which was discussed in Chapter III. As a reminder, the Zapatistas launched The Other Campaign in an attempt to nurture connections between communities engaged in political struggle and foster a greater understanding of how these struggles are interconnected through common systems of oppression and domination. These connections and the knowledge gained through the creation of these connections were envisioned as a means of growing popular power outside of the realm of electoral politics. VOCAL addresses their own understanding of autonomy in the following excerpt of their manifesto:

In this space we struggle for the construction, strengthening, and connection of diverse autonomies, being that we consider the autonomy of the pueblos, groups, collectives, individuals, organizations and others, to be a true alternative challenge to the current authoritarian system of government. Autonomy, as a process of building alternative realities, shows that there are other ways of changing things from the root, where the pueblos decide their own forms and ways of life and not from the institutions of power that merely reform the oppressive and repressive spaces, such as political parties that produce *tiran@s* (tyrants), caciques and authoritarianism in the people that assume them through positions of power. It is for this reason that the work of this space is not confined to the electoral calendar, since with or without elections, autonomy advances through the organization and creation of proposals for an alternative society.

Here VOCAL emphasizes the plurality of autonomies and the processual nature of struggles for autonomy. They make clear that there is no single way to challenge the current system but that the connecting of autonomous struggles is a way to create alternatives in the present. Importantly VOCAL does not view autonomy as an isolating project, where communities close themselves off to the outside world, but rather their vision of autonomy is greatly influenced by the Zapatista's emphasis on nurturing connections between communities in resistance. Along these lines, VOCAL has collaborated with groups in Argentina, Spain, England, Tanzania, the U.S., France, Italy, and Canada. One of the aspects of VOCAL's organizing model that has been particularly effective, however, has been establishing strong relationships with rural communities mostly in Oaxaca, but in other parts of the country like Zapatista communities in neighboring Chiapas and the Frente de Pueblos en Defensa de la Tierra (Front of Pueblos in Defense of the Land) in Mexico state.

In January 2008, VOCAL participated in the Encuentro de Jóvenes del Movimiento Social Oaxaqueño (Conference of Youth from the Oaxacan Social Movement) held in the nearby town of Zaachila. According to the minutes from the event, the conference was meant to strengthen connections between the existing network of youth collectives and other groups associated with the social movement of 2006, and to “collectively analyze the role that youth played in the movement of 2006” and to propose and debate projects for “the reorganization of the social movement.” Dozens of collectives participated in the conference, which was organized around five themes: 1) Assessment of the role of youth in Oaxacan social movements, 2) The role of alternative and commercial media in the social movement, 3) Autonomy and grassroots power

(poder popular), 4) Youth in the face of state repression, and 5) Youth and Indigenous Issues.

Serckas Fontseka, member of AK 47 Crew who earlier shared his experience as a barricadero, was invited to rap at the conference by Mare, a rapper and member of VOCAL. When I asked him what he understood the objective of the conference to be, he responded, “to create dialogue between the people and the youth, to talk about the situation that we experienced in 2006, to establish new links for defense and of critique through culture.” One proposal of how to establish these links was organize a youth caravan to visit remote communities that were involved in some form of struggle and had participated in some way in the social movement of 2006. The idea was to accompany these communities in their struggles by way of documenting human rights abuses, disseminated news via alternative media, facilitating the connection of disparate communities with one another, and offering workshops on how to create community radio stations, silk-screening, first-aid, reading, video and audio documentation, knowing your rights, learning about neoliberalism, how to use computers, how to create crafts out of recycled goods, etc.

What was originally planned as a major caravan with participation from various sectors of the social movement, materialized in May 2008, but on a smaller scale. Members of VOCAL and two other youth collectives, CACITA and CASOTA (discussed below), managed to organize a “caravan” of one bus and called it "El Sendero Del Jaguar Por La Regeneración De Nuestra Memoria" (The Path of the Jaguar for the Regeneration of Our Memory). VOCAL member Rosalía recalled, “as always we didn’t want it to have any affiliation with any political party but we definitely wanted it to represent La Otra

Campaña.” Indeed, the youth caravan follows the model of the Zapatista’s Otra Campaña- trying to connect struggles in an attempt to strengthen them.

The Caravana del Jaguar, as it is often remembered, was instrumental in connecting the autonomous youth network with indigenous communities in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. Although it is true that this network already included indigenous youth migrants, the ties created from the experience of the caravan have provided urban youth with unique perspectives into the struggles of Oaxaca’s indigenous communities.

CASOTA activist Erick told me that the caravan was important for him because he had always lived in urban areas so the caravan allowed him to “see what problems and struggles people had outside of the city. For example, some of the communities that border Chiapas have serious problems with land disputes. The government and *hacendados* (large estate holders) steal land and pit communities against each other with borders and private property.” These ties between youth living in urban Oaxaca and rural communities have been strengthened over the years through various projects carried out by VOCAL and CASOTA.

The following excerpt from a document that VOCAL delivered at an APPO assembly in 2007, offers a compelling window into how urban youth are challenging traditional state defined notions of indigeneity and creating emergent subjectivities based on an inheritance of indigenous struggle (2007a):

We come from below, from the streets of the rebel city, from the barricades, the *pueblos originarios* (first nations), from the migrants, from those who are discriminated against for being different... In 2006 of the insurrection, in the barricades, we happily realized the 500 year colonialist war had not completely

torn our indigenous roots from us, as in those nights of struggle, of unpunished murders, of caravans of death, the values from our indigenous origins that had apparently been lost, powerfully manifested themselves between us.

Fraternity, solidarity, mutual aid, tequio and guelaguetza came down from our pueblos of origin and settled once again between us, the urban indigenous.

Up until the most recent national census in 2012, the National Institute of Geography and Statistics (INEGI) determined indigeneity based purely on language. If you spoke an indigenous language, the State considered you indigenous. If you didn't, you were a mestizo. In 2012, the INEGI allowed for self-designation. Youth in Oaxaca and elsewhere in Mexico have been challenging imposed designations based purely on the preservation of language by declaring themselves "urban indigenous" for years. VOCAL activists claim an indigenous identity and cite their participation during "those nights of struggle" as evidence that they are the heirs of centuries of indigenous resistance to domination. Moreover, VOCAL activists are quick to correct those that might reduce their politics to a political philosophy like anarchism. While there are Magonistas and anarchists in the collective, VOCAL's political project is more than those associations. This was Rosalía's response when I asked her if she identified as anarchist:

The indigenous pueblos of Mexico are not anarchists because of Kropotkin, or Malatesta, or even because of Ricardo Flores Magón. Rather, they are anarchists because of their own forms of living, because of their own forms of relating to one another, their ways of organizing. I believe this to be true because it is actually our practice that makes different concepts real. For example in languages



like Zapotec, Mixtec, I don't think concepts like autonomy or anarchism exist.

Not in those languages, there are other words, it's different.

Rosalía, who is from a Zapotec community in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec that no longer practices *usos y costumbres* (indigenous customary law and tradition), told me that she came to this realization about anarchism and indigenous politics through a conversation she had with Zapotec intellectual and activist Jaime Martínez Luna, who she met through her participation in community radio as a high school student.

In order to explore VOCAL's political projects more concretely it is necessary to introduce CASOTA, since many of VOCAL's projects were territorialized through the physical space provided by CASOTA.

### ***Youth Spaces Post-2006: CASOTA***

CASOTA, the space described in the "*Ethnographic Vignette*" that opened the dissertation, was originally conceived of as a communally rented house that would provide a central location for people associated with the social movement of 2006 to meet and socialize. While closely associated with VOCAL, CASOTA actually began as a separate project with a less pronounced political agenda and a greater focus on being a social and cultural space. There was a constant negotiation between the original intent of its founders and the more political needs of groups like VOCAL. One of the first people I met at CASOTA was Erick, one of the founders and a return migrant from the United States. While many of the other activists I encountered on my first visits to the space viewed me with suspicion, Erick and I hit it off almost immediately. We had a chance to get to know each other a little better one night at the apartment of Abril, the teacher I

mention at the beginning of the dissertation that introduced me to CASOTA. Over several mezcals we discovered that we both had the experience of working construction jobs in the U.S., we both enjoyed working on cars and we both had tattoos. While my appearance was often interpreted in Oaxaca as being a cholo- bald-headed and tattooed, Erick was clearly a *metalero* (metalhead) with long hair and pierced ears. He was four years younger than me, but his life experience would seem to have made him four years my senior.

In February 2010, four months after my first trip to CASOTA, Erick asked me to help him turn the compost for their rooftop farm. It was his *tequio* for the house but a heavy job for one person, so he took me up on my earlier offer to help out. Instead of getting an early start, however, we waited until midday to uncover the 12 ft. x 12 ft. tarp. With the blazing Oaxacan sun almost at full strength, we both grabbed our shovels, stood at opposite ends of the enormous pile of (mostly) organic waste, and began turning it. As we picked out chicken bones and bottle caps from the compost, Erick told me about his experience crossing the U.S.-Mexico border as an undocumented immigrant at the age of 18, how he and his co-workers won a settlement for back-pay from a construction contractor who was receiving US\$ 33 per hour per worker from a government contract yet paid his workers only US\$ 10 per hour, and how this experience led to him to begin organizing with an immigrant rights group called Unidad Latinos en Acción (Latinos in Action and Unity), and in the anti-war movement in the U.S. Northeast, before being deported in 2007. After a couple of hours of hard work on the rooftop, we went to local *depósito* (corner store that sells beer), pooled our coins together and bought a *caguama* (32 ounce bottle of beer) to share. We walked back to CASOTA, climbed the stairs to the

roof and sat under the tin roof covering part of the garden and talked about the political landscape in Oaxaca, which groups and collectives worked with which, who had problems with whom, and who was accused of “selling out.”

I asked him about how he got involved in CASOTA. He responded that he and 3 other people decided to “open a space for people from the APPO that where from different groups, collectives, and political orientations to come together.” Later, in 2011 when we finally sat down for a recorded interview he began by telling me about his first experience with the Oaxacan social movement, which unlike the rest of the youth I spoke with, began in 2007 shortly after being deported from the U.S. Specifically, his story began on July 16, 2007 the day that people associated with the social movement of 2006 held the second annual Guelaguetza Popular as an alternative to the commercial Guelaguetza held by the government. Organizers, under the banners of the APPO and Local 22, announced the Cerro del Fortin as the venue, which is where various incarnations of the festival have been held since pre-colonial times. More recently however, the government constructed its Guelaguetza Auditorium on the Cerro del Fortin. In days leading up to the event, the governor made clear that the dissident festival would not be allowed to take place at the Cerro. This caused a division between those within the movement who thought it wiser to avoid physical confrontation with the state by holding the festival in an alternative venue and those that were willing to risk confrontation in order to reclaim the Cerro as belonging to el pueblo.

The end result was that the Guelaguetza Popular was held on July 16, 2007 in the alternative, much smaller venue of the Plaza de la Danza, while at the same time thousands of protesters attempted to march to the Cerro. Before reaching their destination

they were met by hundreds of police. Here is an excerpt from my fieldnotes from that day:

*Fieldnotes July 16, 2007*

Today was the Guelaguetza Popular at la Plaza de la Danza, which I attended. . . In the morning two groups left the zócalo, one went to the Plaza to organize the Guelaguetza and the second group marched to el Cerro del Fortin to try and take over the auditorium so that the Gueleguetza Popular could be held there- the Plaza is far too small a venue for all the people who turned out. Hundreds of police met the 10,000 or so marchers before arriving to the Cerro. They tear gassed, beat and arrested people. While all of this was going on, at the Plaza our two MC's gave eerie updates over the microphone of the repression occurring nearby as we enjoyed the festivities. At one point the women MC alerted us to the clouds of smoke/gas overhead as a sign of what was going on. According to early reports some 40 people were injured (15 of them police and a handful of reporters as well) and 60 people were arrested. Buses were again set burned- the government blames the marchers and the APPO says the government had the buses burned as a pretext for violence and arrests. There were pictures in the newspapers *La Jornada* and *Noticias* of police blindfolding and cutting the hair of barefoot men who were bloodied from the beatings they endured, their shoes, belts and hair piled on the floor. Not only is the government responding with violence, they are humiliating protesters. Further, *La Jornada* reported plain clothed men in trucks and motorcycles with no plates making "arrests" as well.

A look at an initial list of those arrested that day highlights the ongoing participation of youth in the movement, their place at the front lines of confrontations with police and their vulnerability for arrest and beatings. Regeneracion Radio, a student run radio and website launched as part of the UNAM student strike of 1999, released an early list of 40 protesters arrested that day and of the 37 with an age listed, 26 were between the ages of 15 and 32- including Silvia of VOCAL who was 24 at the time. Erick recounted his experience that day as cementing his dedication to the social movement and demonstrating to him and others, the need for a centrally located space where activists from the social movement could combat the dispersion that follows government repression.

In part, CASOTA was formed out of the recognition that government repression was disarticulating the movement and a belief that having a space in the city could help offset this. The location of CASOTA in the historic center was also a conscious decision to challenge the invisibility of working class people from the center. He explained the location of CASOTA as follows:

It was important for us to find a space downtown, we searched and searched before we found the right one. It was important because people are not used to seeing banda downtown. This way we make our presence visible. It was also important because a lot of banda find it central, as opposed to if we would have opened it in the outskirts of the city. This way banda have a space in the city.

Erick's explanation of the location of CASOTA downtown reflects a conscious effort to counter the spatial exclusion of working class people from the material and symbolic center of the city, which is otherwise dominated by business, tourism and the middle-

class. Sociologist Sujatha Fernandes outlines efforts by barrio residents in Caracas to challenge similar “geographies of power and marginality” whereby “intensified rural immigration to the cities. Growing poverty and segregation, and rising insecurity have led to the criminalization of poorer sectors, which are seen to disrupt the order and health of the city” (2010:17). Erick’s explanation of the central location of CASOTA resonates with Fernandes’ description of the patterns of urban segregation and criminalization of working class residents in Latin American cities.



Figure 30: CASOTA Logo (Ricardo Flores Magón with mohawk). Photo by author

Although the project of CASOTA was initially imagined as primarily serving a social and logistic function for a social movement in the process of regrouping after a sustained campaign of government repression since 2006, it quickly turned into a larger political project when members of VOCAL were invited to open a silk-screening

workshop, and later an office, in the home. Once the political nature of the project became apparent, members decided they needed to come up with a clear political proposal for their collective space. The first step, they decided, was picking a name. They chose the name CASOTA-Casa Autonomía Solidaria Oaxaqueña de Trabajo Autogestivo (Autonomous Oaxacan Solidarity House for Self-Managed Work). The name is also a play on words, since *casota* means big house, as well as being a reference to local affinity project, CACITA- Centro Autónoma para la Creación Intercultural de Tecnologías Apropriadas (Autonomous Center for the Intercultural Creation of Appropriated Technologies). CACITA, which is pronounced *casita* or small house, focuses on the “appropriation of technologies” such as creating bicycle operated appliances. CASOTA, CACITA and VOCAL are the three collectives that organized the Caravana del Jaguar, which was one of CASOTA’s first projects. Through the caravan they were attempting to strengthen connections with communities that participated in the social movement of 2006 and others that may have been already engaged in longer struggles. Youth put into practice in Oaxaca what the Zapatistas promoted through The Other Campaign.

Tied to their vision of autonomy is the need for “economic autonomy.” The spatial layout of the house reflects CASOTA’s proposal from economic autonomy and the names of the various workspaces throughout the house reflect the unique blend of influences that inspire them. These workspaces house CASOTA’s self-sufficient projects and many of them were actually experimented with first in the Okupa of 2006. These include the “dignified trades” of book binding, printing, publishing, silk-screening, and the production of handicrafts and goods made entirely out of recycled material. In addition to selling and bartering goods produced at local flea markets (*tianguis*),

CASOTA also houses the “Lorenzo Sampablo Cervantes Solidarity Store,” names after the man whose murder in 2006 led to the construction of the barricades<sup>46</sup>. The store prioritizes the sale of Oaxacan products, such as handicrafts and other goods made by political prisoners and communities in resistance. It operates through the principle of “horizontal trade” (*comercio horizontal*), whereby prices are set to be fair to both producer and consumer. The sale of goods produced by political prisoners is a result of CASOTA and VOCAL being part of a national network of political prisoners. Several of their members, including David and Silvia, have been arrested for their participation in the social movement. Other goods sold in the store and local flea markets are produced in the “November 25th Silk-screening Workshop,” which is named to commemorate the worst day of PFP repression in 2006<sup>47</sup>. They also sold books, some being donated by authors such as Mexican scholar Carlos Aguirre Rojas and Uruguayan journalist and theorist Raúl Zibechi, other books were actually printed in-house under “Creative Commons” license or direct arrangements with solidary publishing houses.

CASOTA also houses a soup kitchen, free health services, the “Ricardo Flores Magón Library,” which is named after the Mexican revolutionary anarchist from Oaxaca, the “June 14<sup>th</sup> Communal Dormitories,” named in commemoration of the day the police violently evicted striking teachers from the zócalo, and where visiting activists and

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<sup>46</sup> Trinidad Sampablo Cervantes, Lorenzo’s sister, is a close ally of VOCAL and CASOTA youth and frequently attends their events. Likewise, the youth participate in annual commemorations of his murder and hold political events calling attention to the fact that his murder, along with all of the murders from 2006, remains unpunished.

<sup>47</sup> During that week alone at least 192 people were taken prisoner by the PFP, many of them shipped to a maximum security prison in the Northern state of Nayarit (Stephen 2007b:108) where many report being electrocuted, beaten and sexually assaulted.



students from rural communities or other parts of Mexico could stay for free and where tourists could stay for a small fee. Many of the projects carried out were made possible through the donation of used objects and of services. For example, the printing press was donated by a collective in Michoacán, and the bunk beds in the dormitory were also donations. Oaxacan artist Ruben Leyva published an amazing book with hundreds of photographs from the social movement of 2006, “Memorial de Agravios: Oaxaca, México 2006,” which sells on Amazon for 89.95 US\$ and he donated several copies to the families of those murdered in 2006. CASOTA sold copies in their store for the family of Lorenzo Sampablo Cervantes.

VOCAL originally had an office in the house but the decision was made to convert the space into a dormitory since there was a sense that the project of CASOTA was losing its identity and being conflated with VOCAL. Although there is a great deal of agreement in the politics and some overlap in membership between the two collectives, there are points of difference that youth felt were necessary to preserve. One member of CASOTA recalled:

A lot of times there arise conflicts based on ideologies or politics or difference in objective or proposals between groups and that sometimes leads to them not working together based on these differences. We wanted CASOTA to be a space for the social movement of Oaxaca, where different people and groups with different political orientations could come together. We felt that some of these conflicts were carrying over to CASOTA because banda were thinking it was the house of VOCAL. That is why we decided, yes VOCAL has an important place

here in this project, banda from VOCAL are part of CASOTA, but we needed to establish this as a space for everyone from the social movement to come.

Along these lines of inclusiveness, CASOTA also hosts various workshops that “emphasize the strengthening of a social consciousness and personal learning through art and culture” (CASOTA 2008). These workshops are usually free of charge or cost a nominal fee for materials. The instructors donate their time as well, and are often from other collectives. Examples of such workshops given at CASOTA are painting, graffiti, engraving, poster design, film screenings and discussions, popular education workshops and conferences, radio and internet workshops, photography and stencil. Offering workshops is one way that collectives support each other. For example, Arte Jaguar offered a free stencil workshop as a part of a week of hip-hop events meant to serve youth from the surrounding colonias<sup>48</sup>. Erick told me that even though he prefers metal, organizing hip-hop events was important because, “even though some of the kids that come to the shows aren’t politically aware (*consciente*), hip-hop can be a great medium for consciousness-raising.” The space’s central location was vital for the organization of cultural events, allowing people from disparate neighborhoods to connect in the heart of the city.

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<sup>48</sup> This event is described in more detail in Chapter V



Figure 31: B-boys warm up for hip-hop event at CASOTA. Photo by author.

VOCAL and CASOTA activists are also actively engaged in the production and dissemination of knowledge. This to them is part of the process of building autonomy. In his understanding of what autonomy means, Daniel stated, “That within ourselves exists the capacity to analyze, reflect, debate and decide what needs to be done.” He and other activists are conscious of the political nature of knowledge and empower themselves through the production of their own knowledge about their activism and also use this capacity to help other communities engaged in struggles. For example, VOCAL, together with other activists and researchers, created a research project named Campaña de Difusión y Movilización en Defensa de la Tierra y el Territorio en Oaxaca, Méxicio (Campaign for Dissemination and Mobilization in Defense of the Land and Territory in Oaxaca, Mexico). According to the proposal drafted for the project, its main objective was to:

Collect and systematize information regarding the exploitation of natural resources in the state of Oaxaca, as well as analyze and document the geopolitical dynamics involved in this process, which generates local resistances due to contradictory conceptions ...and diverse visions related to the territory.

This project was organized in order to help build those connections that youth believe to be central to the practice of autonomy. Through this research initiative activists support the efforts of communities to resist the imposition of development projects and resource extraction from their territories. Several indigenous communities have reached out to youth after meeting them in 2006 or hearing them speak at political events over the years. While few, if any, of the youth that form VOCAL or CASOTA have college degrees, several have taken classes at the university level or have participated in popular education workshops.

Along these lines, VOCAL and CASOTA, together with sociology students from the public state university (UABJO) who organized their own collective named AAA or Autonomía, Autogestión, Autodeterminación (Autonomy, Self-Management, Self-Determination), and other youth associated with the APPO, initiated a project called the Diplomado de Investigadores Descalzos (Certificate for Barefoot Researchers).<sup>49</sup> This initiative was formed in order to provide a space for activists with an interest in systematic reflection and analysis of their own activism. Sessions were held in CASOTA's "Ricardo Flores Magón" Library or at UNITIERRA.

As a part of this project they invited activists and scholars to exchange their experiences and knowledge of social movements. Some of their guests have included

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<sup>49</sup> The name of the group is yet another reference to the Zapatistas, who frequently make mention of their walking barefoot.

Raúl Zibechi, COCEI activist Isabel Nuñez, Mexican anthropologist Benjamin Maldonado, Chicano activist Simón Sedillo, Gustavo Esteva, Marxist historian Carlos Aguirre Rojas, indigenous leader Palemón Vargas Hernández, and Local 22 activists Omar Olivera, Genaro Rojas and Félix García. Themes or topics of their discussions have ranged from autonomy, comunalidad, state strategies of repression and cooptation, neoliberalism and development and experiences from the teacher's movement and the COCEI. Larger discussions were held in the "November 2<sup>nd</sup> Central Patio" which was the main courtyard in the middle of the house and was named to commemorate one of the greatest victories of the popular movement when they successful repelled thousands of PFP from taking over key installations. CASOTA also held a series of documentary cycles organized around topics such as autonomy, defense of territory and the role of art and social movements.

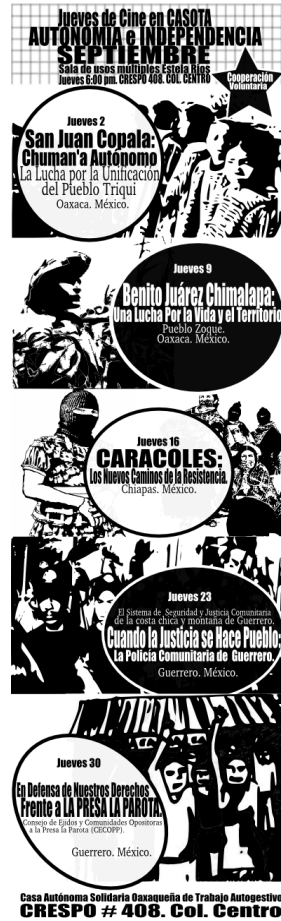


Figure 32: Poster for "Autonomy and Independence Film Series" at CASOTA.



Figure 33: Poster for screening of documentary on art and social movements at CASOTA

The majority of these discussions are available online through the Investigadores Descalzos blog. VOCAL and CASOTA also have their own websites and blogs through which they maintain local and international followers abreast of recent developments, cultural events and causes they feel are important. For example, CASOTA and VOCAL published a series of essays and communiqués regarding the ongoing crisis in the Autonomous Municipality of San Juan Copala. CASOTA also housed a “Documentation Center Iván Illich” which was named after the Austrian philosopher and Catholic priest whose work on “deschooling” and self-directed learning have been highly influential for the Investigadores Descalzos and UNITIERRA. In this space, youth participate in multimedia production in collaboration with various alternative media collectives. Equipment is repaired in the next room over which serves as the “Electronics workshop.”

Youth proved to be extremely savvy with the use of digital media technologies during 2006, with communiqués, video footage, radio programming and analysis instantly streamed and uploaded to the internet via independent media websites, YouTube and blogs. Alternative media collectives produced documentaries chronicling the movement and exposing video footage of government repression. Solidary media collectives, such as Barcelona based *Kaos en la Red*, Madrid based *Rojo y Negro*, and Mexico based *Noticias de la Rebellion*, published communiqués from the barricades, OIR and later VOCAL. Oaxacan youth continue to expand their knowledge and use of these rapidly changing technologies, with activists increasingly sharing calls for mobilizations and denouncements of repression via Facebook and media collectives sharing news via Twitter. Youth also use these social media platforms to further their efforts of connecting with other communities and social movements globally.

Daniel of VOCAL, who lived in one of the rooms in the house, touches on several important aspects of CASOTA when I asked him how he became involved with the project:

I wasn't here for the creation of the house but at first the proposal of the house wasn't what it is now. It was seen more as a question of housing. Little by little the *compañeros* that were here realized that they had to take advantage of the opportunity and that having a space for the movement was also necessary, especially here in the historic center of Oaxaca. This project has been taking shape little by little. In some ways we have been able to fulfill aspects of the project but in others we still lack the necessary efforts, commitment and work. However, we have been able to create a space that is open to a lot of people and in difficult times of repression it has served as a safe space for many. Aside from that we have been able to organize events and activities, allies from different parts of the country and even from other countries have come to share in the struggle. On top of that the issue of culture and art also counts a lot within the movement and here youth have has a space where they are free to express themselves.

Daniel's brief assessment of the gains made by CASOTA illustrates the importance of having both physical and social spaces for activism. He identifies having a safe space where activists can seek refuge from repression as being a key function of CASOTA, but he also emphasizes having a space where youth can feel free to express themselves politically and artistically as being of equal importance.



## *Conclusion*

The horizontal political culture that was experimented with by youth in the temporary spaces of resistance during 2006 such as the barricades, the Okupa and the occupied radios have been expanded upon by VOCAL and CASOTA, and territorialized through CASOTA. Feeling that they were not being represented in the formal spaces of the social movement, youth decided to create their own spaces where they could continue to hone their emerging politics. These spaces provided laboratories for the creation and maintenance of a horizontal politics and novel social relationships which youth understand as being par of their collective work towards autonomy.

The creation of VOCAL and CASOTA is the direct result of the social movement of 2006 but other movements, like the Zapatistas, also influence the collectives. It is important to acknowledge such impacts on new political cultures when gauging social movement success or failure. One example of how youth political culture has been shaped by the social movement of 2006 is through their relationship to food. The rooftop farm at CASOTA is part of a larger effort by activists in Oaxaca to promote urban agriculture. This desire to achieve a greater degree of food sovereignty comes in large part from lessons learned in 2006, when food shortages in the city were widespread. With food not arriving to the markets fast enough to meet demands, people had to find alternatives for feeding themselves. As the testimonies of La Bruja and Mentas Liberadas mentioned, agricultural communities supported the movement by sending food to encampments and barricades but even so food did not always arrive to those who needed it. 2006 did not mark the creation of food sovereignty concerns in Oaxaca, but for many urban youth it was the first time they contemplated the politics of food- how they got

their food, who controlled food access, and how neoliberal reforms had affected their relationships to the production and consumption of food. The politicization of food for youth activists is just one example of how social movements can impact political cultures.

CASOTA became a space for youth build novel social and political relationships among their peers, but also with their elders, other movements, and with rural communities, among others. Sociologist Francesca Polletta calls such spaces “prefigurative spaces,” which she defines as:

Explicitly political and oppositional (although their definition of politics may encompass issues usually dismissed as cultural, personal, or private), they are formed in order to prefigure the society the movement is seeking to build by modeling relationships that differ from those characterizing mainstream society” (1999:11).

In the next chapter, I will argue that such prefigurative spaces are part of larger networks of “counter-spaces” that include sustained social movement spaces like those described here, as well as the episodic occupation of public space through direct-actions.

## CHAPTER VII

### NETWORKING COUNTER-SPACES: HOW YOUTH SUSTAIN

#### AUTONOMOUS URBAN ACTIVISM

Any struggle to reconstitute power relations is a struggle to  
reorganize their spatial bases  
David Harvey (1990:238)

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In the waning hours of February 15, 2011 two planes full of military-trained federal police (PFP) landed in the capital city of Oaxaca, where they were joined by local police forces, Mexican army soldiers and semitrailers full of metal barricades. The soldiers and police blocked off large sections of the city's historic downtown area ahead of President Felipe Calderon's scheduled visit with newly elected governor Gabino Cué. Despite the military presence, Sección 22 mobilized its base and assembled in the zócalo to protest Calderon's visit. Police eventually began firing tear gas and rubber bullets indiscriminately into the crowd injuring a dozen protesters and reporters, with 2 activists in critical condition after being shot in the head by gas canisters and rubber bullets. There were also 13 reported arrests. Almost five years after the popular take over of the capital city, the federal and state governments made a statement that the government controlled the streets of Oaxaca and that political dissent would not be tolerated.

Although militarization has colonized the norms of everyday life in Oaxaca- to the point that having a truck full of men in ski-masks pointing machine guns at you has become a regular occurrence- this show of force against protesters did not go unchallenged. News of the police repression spread quickly through mobile communication, social media and face-to-face encounters. Messages on Facebook read:

“The Uprising was never over! This has just begun! Everyone to downtown!” Various youth collectives that initially refused the teachers call to protest took to the streets and helped drive the heavily armed police and military out of the area by throwing rocks and their own gas canisters back at them. The loose network of reinforcements quickly erected their own barricades throughout the downtown area to keep the police and military from returning.

Calls went out that evening to social movement networks through text messages, social media and independent media sources announcing plans for mass mobilizations the next morning to protest the governor’s compliance in repressing the teachers. Calls also urged people to erect more barricades throughout the city in preparation for the continued government repression that many anticipated. Instead, the federal police followed the President back to Mexico City that night and the governor, fearing another popular takeover of the city, was forced to issue a public apology to protesters. Years after many commentators declared the social movement dead, youth and union activists drew on their shared experiences of mobilizing and self-defense to exercise their own claims to the streets and public spaces of Oaxaca, while at the same time condemning government authoritarianism.



Figure 34: Teachers' protest Feb 15, 2011: Photo credit: Oaxaca Libertaria



Figure 35: Police attack protesters Feb 15, 2011: Photo credit: Oaxaca Libertaria



Figure 36: Youth shoot firecrackers at police Feb 15, 2011: Photo credit: Oaxaca Libertaria

Through this event we can see how the experience of the APPO and the social movement of 2006 heavily informed activists and government officials alike- activists in their practice of self-defense, solidarity and defense of territory and government officials in the message they aimed to convey through force, and later their decision to retreat and apologize. The event suggested that the networks and relationships forged through the social movement of 2006 were still alive and viable in early 2011. This defies some of the narratives that circulated at the time that the social movement had failed, since it was unable to achieve its main goal of forcing the former governor from office; that the movement ended in 2010 when the ruling PRI party was finally voted out of the governor's office; or that the movement was no longer relevant since it no longer had the ability to mobilize the hundreds of thousands of people it did in 2006. The re-claiming of urban Oaxaca by activists during President Calderon's visit highlights the continuity of social movement activism and the important role of everyday organizing in sustaining movement energy through the inevitable ebbs and flows of social movement life. Gauging movement success and failure through the narrow parameters of their impact on state institutions ignores their impacts on political cultures, local actors' subjectivities and other cultural impacts such as those that made the defensive action of February 15, 2011 possible.

In this chapter, I will further theorize the importance of space for social movements and the centrality of spatial projects in the emerging youth political cultures associated with the Oaxacan social movement of 2006. I will build on the discussions in the previous chapters dealing with various activist and social movement spaces in Oaxaca

in order to explain the connection between the more sporadic and ephemeral spaces of direct action like the one described above, and more territorialized spaces like Okupa and CASOTA. In doing so, I will demonstrate the importance of creating networked spaces of resistance for maintaining and extending social movement activism across time and space, making events like the one just described possible.

### ***The Political Terrain of Urban Youth***

A Foucauldian understanding of power recognizes that power is not only enacted within official state structures, but instead acknowledges that power operates as a social relation diffuse through all space- “ Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere...power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a strength we are endowed with; it is the name one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society” (1990:93). Too often, the study of politics misses this fact by focusing exclusively on parliamentary campaigns and legislative maneuvering. Such a bias conception of politics as strictly electoral, dismisses popular politics, further obscuring marginalized sectors of society. This is an especially egregious omission in the case of the Global South, or as Partha Chatterjee puts it “most of the world,” where the majority of the people “are only tenuously, and even then ambiguously and contextually, rights-bearing citizens in the sense imagined by the constitution” (2004: 38). In this formulation, even that majority that does not benefit from the promises of “formal” citizenship and thus is not afforded any meaningful access to the political channels deemed legitimate by the liberal democratic system, still engages in political relationships with the state, with other sectors of society, and with each other.

Chatterjee deems these contextually-rights bearing citizens “political society,” which he distinguishes from “civil society”- or the relatively small number of elites with the social and cultural capital necessary to enjoy citizenship rights as envisioned by democratic political theory. Chatterjee refers to civil society as the “high ground of modernity,” but reminds us that the state must respond to the political reality of an active political society. In responding, the state “must descend from that high ground to the terrain of political society in order to regain legitimacy as providers of well-being and to confront whatever is the current configuration of politically mobilized demands” (41).

That “terrain of political society,” particularly that terrain reappropriated, reconfigured and reimagined by social movements, is the focus of this dissertation. Specifically, I am concerned with the social production and contestation of that terrain vis-à-vis the ongoing construction of urban autonomy in Oaxaca as envisioned through the network of alternative institutions and spaces introduced in the previous chapters. While popular narratives lament the fact that Mexican youth are “apathetic, almost depressed. There is much disillusionment, a lack of idealism, of dreams; we can even say that there is a certain cynicism floating in the air, even though it is not only present in Mexico, but in all of the world” (Hurtado 2011). The innovative models of politics being offered by youth would seem to contradict this pessimism. I argue that we must look beyond the official channels of the nation-state in order to appreciate the politics enacted by large sectors of youth- in Mexico and throughout the world. In this chapter, I engage the spatial politics of youth activism in Oaxaca through an event-centered analysis of two separate events that occurred during my fieldwork: 1) The defense of urban territory which occurred during President Felipe Calderon’s visit (described above), and 2) A



direct action executed in June of 2010 that was coordinated by various collectives and organizations and where VOCAL and CASOTA featured prominently. Through the analysis of these two events, I attempt to make the case for the importance of focusing on the intersection of everyday spatial politics and social movement direct action as a fruitful way to appreciate social movement impacts and temporality. Juris and

If we accept the conception of power as diffuse through all spaces, then we must understand resistance and counter-power as being enacted through diffuse extra-institutional spaces. Foucault theorized as much when he insisted that, “the points, knots, or focuses of resistance are spread over time and space at varying densities, at times mobilizing groups or individuals in a definitive way” (1990:96). These spaces of resistance include public spaces occupied or otherwise transformed by social movements, such as the *zócalo*, which as the event described above shows, continues to be a focal point for the exercise of both state power and resistance- even after the former governor’s attempt at erasing this through the removal of the State Capitol building, the remodel of the plaza and finally, through the use of violence against protesters. Spaces of resistance can also include more permanent activist spaces like CASOTA, which is where several youth who participated in the defensive action on February 15, 2011 were when they learned of the attack against the teachers. The events of that day offer a window into the ways in which these kinds of spaces of resistance are networked and the impact they have on activism.

When considering the events of that day in relation to resistance and urban space, it helps to try and appreciate how the urban geography of the city mirrors the social landscape vis-à-vis spatial segregation and marginalization. The political center of the

city has historically been in the historic city center, and as the events I have described I this dissertation have shown, this continues to be the center of popular politics. The majority of Oaxaca's urban working class population, however, live in peripheral neighborhoods disconnected from each other and from the city center. The central location of CASOTA greatly facilitated youth activists' participation that day, as they quickly made the trek five blocks to zócalo when they received news of the violence and were easily able to regroup afterwards, as opposed to if they would have been in their colonias which are scattered throughout the urban peripheries anywhere from 45 minutes to 2 hours away via public transportation. Other youth who participated that day were four blocks away at a youth-run art space, Estación Cero, which I will describe in the next chapter. The important thing to appreciate here is that the less spectacular everyday organizing and socializing that occurs through the network of youth spaces, which includes CASOTA and Estación Cero, are pivotal to the remapping the city that connects working class youth to each other and the city center.

### ***Public Space and Counter-space: Untangling the Web***

Important in understanding the implications of activist projects that reconfigure space like those just described is understanding the relationship between public space, activist spaces and political activism. In order to begin to understand the political power found within public spaces, one need look no further than to the extraordinary energy that social movements, especially urban movements, expend trying to occupy them, and the incredible resources that governments and capitalist interests spend trying to maintain control over them. Looking to history for instances of popular struggle, control over

urban space is often central. For example, consider the massacre of Chinese protesters in Tiananmen Square, of Mexican students in Tlatelolco, or the repression against marching students that sparked Czechoslovakia's Velvet Revolution. One can also look to recent instances of political uprisings given meaning and impact, largely through the physical and symbolic occupation of public space. For example, the #Occupy Movements, which centered around the physical occupation of highly visible public spaces as a means of facilitating the expression of popular grievances and expanding the public discourse around various social issues; there was the mass occupation outside of the state capital of Wisconsin in 2011 in protest of anti-union legislation; or consider the images which captured the global public's imagination in 2011 of hundreds of thousands of Egyptian's occupying Tahrir Square. There are countless other instances that one can look to, but the important thing to appreciate is that when large sectors of society feel disenfranchised, when they feel that the formal political channels are either not accessible to them or are not serving them, they often move to occupy public space as a means of being seen and heard.

Occupying public space can be a hugely effective way to put public pressure on the state, capitalist interests, or other dominant groups. Maintaining this organized dissident presence, especially in militarized spaces, however, is often too costly in terms of energy and safety for activists to sustain. In addition to state repression, critical public opinion can fragment movement efforts since such occupations often achieve their effect by preventing "business as usual." This can negatively impact fellow citizens' livelihoods, and often activists' own livelihoods.

In Oaxaca, the matter of sit-ins, roadblocks, marches, and other occupations is a highly contentious topic, especially post-2006. With its base of 70,000 members, the teacher's union is the most regular and visible practitioner of public occupations in Oaxaca (Cook 1996). In 2006, the *megamarchas* were especially impressive in scope, with the largest being estimated anywhere between 500,000 to 1 million participants (Osorno 2007; Martínez Vásquez 2007; respectively). While rural communities, labor unions, urban poor, and other sectors seeking redress from the state government have long taken to protesting in the zócalo, it seems that there has been a revival of direct-actions in Oaxaca since 2006. The municipal government of Oaxaca reported 44 marches and 79 roadblocks in the capital city in 2009 alone (Martínez 2010).

These tactics are not the sole property of opposition groups either, during my fieldwork in Oaxaca I recall unions of taxi-drivers affiliated with the ruling PRI party conducting marches and supporters of the PRI candidate for governor in 2010 executing a roadblock of a main artery through the city in protest of what they claimed was bias coverage of his campaign by local media. A VOCAL activist even joked with me, telling me that one evening when he was arriving home to his colonia, a frustrated neighbor asked him "Now what are you after?" Chiding him because certainly it was people like him, people associated with the APPO, that blocked the road that day. The young man told me that in fact it was the taxi drivers affiliated with the PRI who blocked the road that day, and then he laughed and asked rhetorically, "What good are roadblocks anymore when the PRI and the government use them?"

With mobilizations becoming this routine of an occurrence, it is not hard to imagine that many Oaxacans have grown increasingly frustrated with these tactics. An

anonymous commenter left this angry response on the blog of a youth run media collective following the events I described at the beginning of this chapter:

Those of us that actually work are the people that are contributing something to our state, we are the ones that make Oaxaca prosper, we are not out being lazy in marches where the only thing that you do is degrade the image of the state, we DON'T damage the patrimony. The majority of us think that what you, the teachers, the so called "appo" call "STRUGGLE" is bullshit, if... just as you read this, you block our way, we arrive late to work, are you going to pay us the wages they discount from our pay? I didn't think so, so please stop with your stupidity and bullshit and... spend your free time, which in reality you must have A LOT, reading and learning to write, because for the age I imagine you must have it is VERY embarrassing to see writing and spelling of such [poor] quality.

The anonymous commenter raises concerns voiced by many in Oaxaca, regarding the disruption of daily life by direct-actions targeting public space. This splintering of public opinion is something that younger activists have begun to take into account, especially with the routinization of marches, roadblocks and sit-ins. The same young man I quoted above admitted to me that, "we need to find new strategies of protest that reach those in power, those that abuse, without harming or upsetting people who are just trying to work, humble people like us, struggling to make a living."

In addition to public opinion, direct-actions of this sort are difficult to sustain because of fatigue, repression, and once they become routinized they no longer cause the same impact. For these reasons, occupations are usually episodic in nature, so that for social movements to maintain a public profile through the ebbs and flows of political

activity, they need to create other venues for their activity. I argue that social movements, and the political cultures they help create, are far more sustainable if movements are able to create a network of *counter-spaces*. Borrowing from noted social theorist Henri Lefebvre (1991:381-2), and English sociologist Fran Tonkiss' (2005:64) interpretation of his work, I define counter-spaces as spatial projects produced through the political imagination and practice of social movements as an alternative to the spaces created by the dominant system. Such spaces provide cracks in the hegemony of the totalizing logic of the neoliberal capitalist city- a logic that seeks to devour the public through privatization- by openly challenging the political and capitalist classes ownership and control of the city's public spaces and public life.

To be clear, counter-spaces do not exist completely outside of dominant space, nor are counter-spaces and public space mutually exclusive. Rather, counter-space is a project, a continual process of contestation that is never complete. Much like hegemony is a dominant project that is always contested and negotiated, dominant space is never complete. Its incomplete nature is exposed and expanded through projects of counter-space, which exist in direct opposition to the strategies and power relations operating in dominant space. Lefebvre understood such spatial projects to be initially utopian alternatives to actually existing "real" space, and as such as representing the potentiality of social space (1991). In the case of the counter-spaces analyzed here, the potentiality which youth activists experiment with is that of urban autonomy- of horizontal webs of connection between communities and movements.

Defining the relationship between counter-space and public space depends largely on how one defines public space. Public space is traditionally thought of as social space,

which is open and accessible to all people, without monetary cost, and regardless of social identity. Of course, this is an idealized notion of public space since in reality social hierarchies often limit who can occupy public space, and capitalist and state interests almost always regulate such space, often through a logic antagonistic to the democratic ideals of open and free space. In my view then, counter-spaces become projects that seek to reclaim the egalitarian promise of public space. That youth are conscious of the potentiality of counter-spaces, and the antagonisms involved in their creation, is evident in the following excerpt from OIR's Okupa manifesto (see Appendix A for complete manifesto):

El pueblo with its great capacity to organize, to act and to resist has demonstrated to us that the stance of taking spaces that have never belonged to el pueblo is just, and [it is] even more just to defend them. For example, the media OKUPIED (*OKUPADOS*) by the women and pueblo of Oaxaca...to OKUPY is to say NO to capitalism, which excludes those who do not dance to its tune...To OKUPY is to desire and love the struggle for free spaces where we can grow, fulfill ourselves and create...For all of the above reasons, we have decided to OKUPY AN ABANDONED BUILDING and give it life.

The space we speak of, is an abandoned building that for many years served as the municipal police station...Is it just to transform the centers of torture, repression and manipulation, into centers social interest, of solidarity and justice?... We ask all of el pueblo and those who receive this Information: Do you think that it is just and possible to pay rent for a space that spreads culture and works solidarity and mutual aid between the pueblos? Would you be willing to

support and defend the liberty and creation of these spaces that we hope to make a reality today?

In this regard, today us youth in resistance, make a request for solidarity, to join forces and support in order to appropriate, liberate and create spaces. Making out of them areas of self-empowerment, mutual aid, solidarity, *tequio*, alternative education, artistic, cultural, and countercultural creation and where we will carry out direct democracy as a means of autonomous organization that serves the common good.

WE CALL ON el pueblo of Oaxaca to disobey the injustice of private property, of profit and okupy abandoned spaces as your basic needs dictate and participate directly in the space OIR, make it yours with your work, creativity and solidarity (OIR 2006, author's translation).

OIR's 2006 manifesto represents a radically transformative vision of society and of the role that public space play in that society. Activists frame their occupation of the abandoned police station as a collective and conscious enactment of a politics of autonomy, collective use of space, use value over market value, and indigenous practice of communal labor (*tequio*). Importantly they also frame their activism as explicitly anticapitalist and antiauthoritarian. Here it is useful to turn to Lefebvre's distinctions between two kinds of forces involved in the construction of counter-spaces: 1) reactionary forces, which are those that oppose a particular spatial project in order to protect their own privileged space, and 2) radical forces, which oppose that same project on the grounds that it represents the seizure of that space by capitalism. Building on this distinction, I consider counter-spaces to exist on a continuum between reactionary and



radical, with the former being more narrow and immediate in scope, and the latter being more expansive and transformative. Counter-spaces like the Okupa and CASOTA tend towards the radical end of the spectrum, with their spatial politics being articulations of larger prefigurative political projects that are radically transformative in scope. Moreover, they challenge not only capitalist control over public space, but attempt to challenge all forms of social and political domination by infusing space with alternative horizontal relationships. For example, CASOTA signaled such a challenge with the following graffiti painted on the façade of the building- “Revolutionary in the streets and a tyrant at home? End patriarchy!” Here CASOTA was denouncing a familiar contradiction in opposition politics whereby the patriarchy that permeates dominant society is reproduced within social movements.

Counter-spaces then, can be projects of reappropriated public space, but they can also include projects that redefine spaces that might otherwise be considered private- as is the case with CASOTA or an allied space called Espacio Cultural (EC) el Hormiguero. EC el Hormiguero was opened in one of the more established middle-class neighborhoods adjacent to the downtown area. The space is the project of members of the alternative media collective Hormigas Libertarias who are regular collaborators with VOCAL and CASOTA. They opened EC el Hormiguero in 2012 as a space “available to the public, with a library, meeting space, room for workshops or different forms of recreation...it is a public space that is located on private property.” Hormigas Libertarias pay rent, utilities and Internet and for that reason charge 5 pesos for every 3 people who use the space (0.38 US\$). Spaces like this one are not quite private nor public and therefore challenge Western binaries of space. Much like Lynn Stephen’s work (2005)

illuminates the ways in which family patios in Zapotec towns of Oaxaca's central valleys become public spaces during fiestas, counter-spaces like El Hormiguero and CASOTA complicate our thinking of public and private space.

These spaces are hubs for social, political and cultural activism and are thus illuminating sites through which to understand how the political culture shaped by social movements is maintained over time and space. Through the creation and maintenance of these spaces youth experiment with and hone their practice of alternative politics, living, socializing, decision-making and dissent. As such, these spaces become the laboratories for everyday activism, which serve as concrete complements to the strategic and episodic reappropriation of public spaces. This complementary approach has been particularly effective in the wake of the repressive government response to the popular takeover of the city in 2006, which has made sustained public actions too risky and costly.

I insist that creating these hybrid networks of counter-spaces that combine and complicate public and private notions of space is a key feature of the emergent political cultures of youth associated with the social movement of 2006. This is not to say, of course, that previous generations of youth activists and older activists do not combine the use of public and private space. Rather, what is novel and highly effective is the degree to which these networks of counter-space are radical and prefigurative, rather than reactionary and hierarchical. The very critiques leveled at youth activists- that they lack a singularly defined ideology and demand- can be considered one of their greatest strengths. Youth activists do not have a singular goal *if* we think of goals in the familiar narrow terms of legislation and elections. But they *are* unified in their demand for an end to domination and exploitation through the construction and articulation of autonomies

and horizontal relations. As such, they seek to create spaces where they engage in the difficult and uneven process of exercising their horizontal norms, converting them from utopian ideals to radical practice. One example of this approach is the creation and maintenance of horizontal relationships between VOCAL and CASOTA and the Autonomous Municipality of San Juan Copala.

***Urban Youth Activism in Support of Indigenous Autonomy: An Ethnographic account of the Remapping of Space in Oaxaca***

During the social movement of 2006, several Triqui and Mixtec communities in the district of Juxtlahuaca in the Mixtec region of Oaxaca, participated in the popular takeover of the city hall in the county seat, Santiago Juxtlahuaca, and the declaration of a regional APPO organization (Stephen 2013). In January of 2007, twenty Triqui communities in the area declared themselves an autonomous municipality, thereby attempting to unify a politically divided and fragmented area that has been besieged with violence for generations (López y Bárcenas 2009). There is a long and complicated history of social movements and paramilitary groups in the region with a great deal of slippage between groups being considered one or the other over time.<sup>50</sup> Important for our discussion here, however, is the fact that those that declared their autonomy in 2007 belonged to the recently formed Independent Movement for Triqui Unification and Struggle (MULTI) which splintered from the paramilitary group Movement for Triqui Unification and Struggle (MULT). Another paramilitary group in the region, the Union for the Social Well-being of the Triqui Region (UBISORT), was originally allied with MULTI before turning on the autonomous municipality in 2010 (Stephen 2013).

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<sup>50</sup> See López y Bárcenas 2009 and Stephen 2013 for detailed accounts of these histories.

According to the Autonomous Municipality of San Juan Copala, 25 people were killed by paramilitaries over a one-year period between 2009-2010, most of them Triquis from the Copala (<http://autonomiaencopala.wordpress.com>). Two exceptions were the Mixtec human rights activist Alberta (Bety) Cariño Trujillo and Finnish activist Jyri Antero Jaakkola, who were murdered by UBISORT gunmen on April 27, 2010 as they attempted to deliver humanitarian aid to San Juan Copala as part of a human rights caravan. I met Jyri earlier that year because he was staying at the CASOTA dormitories. He told me about his collective in Finland that imported Zapatista coffee and built a sailboat that carried 250 tons of humanitarian aid to Angola. Jyri's collective sponsored one of the founders of VOCAL on a visit to Finland to speak about the collective's experience organizing in Oaxaca and in 2010 Jyri received a grant from the Finnish government to study community responses to damn projects in Oaxaca. While I never had the pleasure of meeting Bety, her organization Centro de Apoyo Comunitario Trabajando Unidos (Center for Community Support Working Together or CACTUS) helped the community of San Juan Copala launch a community radio station and regularly collaborated with VOCAL and CASOTA.

Bety and Jyri, along with members of VOCAL, CASOTA, international human rights observers and investigative reporters from the Mexican magazine *Contralinea* participated in a human rights caravan organized in response to a request from members of San Juan Copala, whose community was blockaded by UBISORT paramilitaries. The caravan was attempting to break the blockade that violently restricted access to and from the Triqui town, leaving residents cut-off from food, clean water and medical attention.

The caravan, however, never made it to Copala, as it was ambushed by paramilitaries before arriving.

After being told of the ambush, Oaxacan police and the Mexican military refused to enter the region to search for survivors, retrieve the bodies of Jyri and Bety, much less investigate the murders. All of the bullet wounds suffered by those in the caravan were determined to come from high caliber weapons which further corroborates the evidence found in a photograph taken by VOCAL activist Daniel, one of members of the caravan. The photograph, which I saw myself, showed a group of heavily-armed gunmen ambushing the caravan from atop a hill alongside the road that passes through La Sabana en route to San Juan Copala. A lower resolution version was published as on the alternative media website *Kaos en la Red* (Figure 37). The use of high-caliber weapons in one of the most marginalized regions in all of Mexico might be difficult to explain, except for the fact that activists and scholars agree that the paramilitary group UBISORT was founded by the PRI and continues to receive material support from them to protect party interests in the region (López y Barcenás 2009). According to a communiqué issued by the International Observation Commission (*Comisión de Observación Internacional*), Rufino Juárez Hernández, the leader of UBISORT, issued a public threat at a press conference held in Juxtlahuaca on April 26, 2010 stating that “under absolutely no circumstances will we allow any kind of caravan to enter, and we can not be held accountable if anything should happen to them” (2010). The next day, as the caravan passed through the town of La Sabana, UBISORT gunmen made good on Juárez Hernández’s threats as they ambushed the unarmed activists, killing Jyri Antero Jaakkola

and Alberta (Bety) Cariño Trujillo and injuring several others, including members of VOCAL and CASOTA.



Figure 37: Photo showing paramilitaries ambushing caravan. Photo credit: Daniel (VOCAL).



Figure 38: Shirt belonging to survivor of ambush. Photo credit: CASOTA



Figure 39: Survivor of ambush. Photo credit: CASOTA

On June 8, 2010 a coalition of over 40 human rights and civil society organizations formed the Bety Cariño and Jyri Jaakkola Humanitarian Aid Caravan, in a renewed attempt at breaking the paramilitary blockade on the Autonomous Municipality of San Juan Copala. The caravan was composed of two delegations, one departed from the city of Oaxaca and the other departed from Mexico City. Among those present in the Bety Cariño and Jyri Jaakkola Humanitarian Aid Caravan were advisors from the APPO, members of Sección 22, members of VOCAL and CASOTA, alternative and mainstream media and members of the Mexican Congress.

In order to call attention to the situation in San Juan Copala and pressure the government to assure safe passage for the caravan, various groups associated with the social movement of 2006 organized a series of direct-actions for that day. One of the more visible actions was the occupation of Cinco Señores- an intersection that housed one of the most important barricades in 2006 and is one of the busiest intersections in the city. Most of the members of CASOTA and VOCAL that did not go on the second caravan participated in this action while others were part of the media team based at the Sección 22 radio station, Radio Plantón. The decision to occupy the Cinco Señores intersection is practical because of the visibility of the intersection, yet also highly symbolic due to the importance of the barricade housed there during 2006. In fact, several of the activists involved in the occupation that day were barricader@s from Cinco Señores in 2006. Hence, we see activists remapping the city through the new meanings and uses they are constructing for public spaces such as this intersection, which now joins the zócalo as a focal point for extra-institutional politics in Oaxaca.

Members of VOCAL and CASOTA met at the house shortly after 7 a.m. that morning and then walked to the zócalo where the teachers' union had its annual encampment. Other members of VOCAL and CASOTA were already at the zócalo since they had set up an encampment together with teachers from FMIN within the larger teachers' encampment in solidarity with the Encampment of the Displaced Woman and Children from San Juan Copala who had been in the zócalo for several months. Once there, activists from VOCAL, CASOTA and FMIN joined roughly 60 people from several other groups, including a large number who were from an organization of street vendors which included many youths and some older vendors as well. Together in the center of the zócalo they strategized how to execute the occupation of the intersection.

After some brief discussion the decision was made to split up and have one contingent walk the 15 blocks southeastward to the intersection while another group was to commandeer buses to use to block the intersection. The decision to form two groups was made in order to lessen the spectacle of so many people waiting at the bus stop. There was some confusion however, and everyone ended up walking to the bus stop. In the time it took to walk the two blocks east to the bus stop, the group had swelled to about 120 as members of the various groups who did not attend the brief meeting joined in. Upon seeing the large group of people on the street corner, the first few bus drivers drove past without stopping at the bus stop. Realizing this, several young men from the organization of street vendors walked up to a bus in the middle of the street, a couple got onboard and soon the bus was unloading passengers at the designated bus stop and loading a contingent of protesters. Soon after, young men commandeered 3 more buses and loaded everyone else onboard.



I boarded the last bus along with two young women from VOCAL, an middle-aged street vendor and her teenage daughter, and fifteen young men ranging from their late teens to late twenties in age and most of whom were from the same organization of street vendors. The bus was taken with no violence or even raised voices. The driver responded to the young men who commandeered the bus, “I agree with the movement but I can not afford to fix the bus if anything happens to it, all I ask is that you respect that and there will be no problem.” And in fact, everyone was remarkably respectful to one another. I was nervous when I realized that a group of young men were going to commandeer buses to take us from the meeting in the zócalo to the intersection where the action was to take place, but as soon as I got on the bus I was shocked (and relieved) at how smoothly and almost cordial the process was. The driver asked where they wanted to go and if they wanted the door open or closed. The young men, in turn, assured the driver that they had no intention of harming his bus and that “this is only necessary because the government doesn’t listen to the people unless we make a scene (*un escandalo*).”

Along with the four buses, several heavy trucks were also commandeered to block the large six-way intersection. Once the intersection was blocked, there was some discussion among activists from different groups as to whether to perform a full or partial blockade. A mestizo man in his mid-thirties that belonged to an organization of street vendors argued for a total blockade, insisting that “That way we show Ulises (the governor) that we are not going to be ignored! All eyes are on Copala. We will paralyze the city if we must but justice will be had!” A young man in his late 20s from VOCAL argued for a partial blockade so that traffic would still pass through the intersection, “If we do a total blockade of the intersection the cars and people will not even be able to see

our banners and then who will we give the flyers to? With a partial blockade people can still get to work and go about their business...but they will pass through the intersection and we will tell them of the assassination of Bety, of Jyri, of the ambush, and most importantly they will learn of Copala's struggle and all of their dead. This way, with a partial blockade and not a total one, we will disseminate the news of Copala and show that we can still shut the city down if he (Ulises) and his assassins are not brought to justice and the autonomy of the brothers and sisters of Copala is not respected!"

Others joined the debate in the middle of one of the lanes of the intersection, including a middle-aged indigenous man representing a group of indigenous *campesinos* and a middle-aged woman who is part of the organization of street vendors. Both of them favored a partial blockade mainly for reasons of disseminating news of the human rights violations in Copala. A young man from the Bloque Negro Libertario (Liberatory Black Block) disagreed with the partial blockade, thinking it a better strategy to execute a total blockade as a show of force and to prevent *porros* (government sponsored provocateurs) from infiltrating the action by inciting violence, as is common practice in many parts of Mexico. After several minutes of discussion and debate, the decision was made to begin that morning with a partial blockade, allowing for the dissemination of information to drivers and passers-by about the caravan and about Copala. They would then escalate to a total blockade later in the morning, as a show of force to the government.

Each group took responsibility for a section of the intersection, and had the drivers of the trucks and buses move their vehicles to completely block off certain streets and partially open others. In this move, one of the drivers who was told to move his cement truck to close off a lane drove off and escaped his unwilling participation in the

road block. This did not seem to deter anyone and activists merely had a bus driver move his vehicle into that lane. Each group then blocked the flow of traffic in the open lanes by holding a large banner across the street. Most of the banners were specifically related to Copala- for example one had the words of a chant that was common during marches, “*Copala aguanta, Oaxaca se levanta!*” (Stay strong Copala, Oaxaca will rise up!)- while other banners had been used in various marches over the years and had more general messages like “*Todo el poder al pueblo*” (All power to the people) or “*Fuera URO*” (Get out URO). While some blocked the intersections with banners, others handed out flyers. At first traffic was held indefinitely, coordinating the release of vehicles into the intersection through hand signals and whistling with the other groups. After a few chaotic exchanges, several people from VOCAL, CASOTA and the street vendors decided on the strategy of holding traffic through one entire cycle of the stoplights and then release them on the second green. Lacking the leadership structure of formal organizations, the loose network of groups conducting the action that day had some miscues but their collective experience of participating in such actions prevailed and they were able to achieve a functional level of coherence.

The partial blockade was held for about an hour-and-a-half before activists shut down the intersection completely- this was around the same time transit police began redirecting traffic away from the intersection. Throughout the day, I relayed updates on the progress of the caravan that I received via text message from Abril, who as a reminder is a member of Sección 22, FMIN and is the mother of VOCAL activist Mónica who was shot in the back on the first caravan. Abril told me she chose to participate in the second caravan to show her support for her daughter’s participation and to show her

support, as a teacher and member of the APPO, for the community of San Juan Copala. As occurred with the dissemination of news of the attacks against teachers on February 15, 2011, again on this day the use of text messaging was widespread. This method is the cheapest way to communicate via mobile technology and is among the most widespread for communicating urgent news about political actions in Oaxaca. Another way VOCAL and CASOTA activists stayed current on the progress of the caravan and related news that day was through the radio on VOCAL member Mare's cellular phone.

Once the flow of traffic was stopped, the scene was less chaotic and even tranquil. A street kid who was maybe 10 years old played soccer in the intersection with young men from one of the anarchist collectives and an artisan who was with the street vendors (Figure 40). The routinization of such direct-actions in post-2006 Oaxaca was made even more apparent when I noticed a man selling shaved ice to the activists (Figure 41). Similarly, vendors regularly sell water and refreshments during marches.



Figure 40: Street ball. Photo Credit: Author



Figure 41: "*Ricos Raspas*." Photo credit: Author

It did not take long for some youth to dispatch of several campaign posters for PRI candidates in the upcoming local elections, including one especially large billboard for gubernatorial candidate Eviel Magaña Pérez that ominously overlooked the intersection. Several young men from an anarchist collective climbed a building located on one of the corners of the intersection to cut the posters down. After cutting down and burning the posters they went back for the larger billboard, after struggling with it for about fifteen minutes they were able to tear it down. A group of people including a middle-aged woman and the 10 year-old street kid, helped drag the billboard poster out to the middle of the intersection where they proceeded to burn it (see Figures 42 and 43).



Figure 42: Campaign ads being dragged. Photo credit: Author.



Figure 43: Campaign ads being burned. Photo credit: Author

Banners that were used earlier to stop traffic were now strung up in front of buses or hanging from them. One of these banners had been painted in the “Salon de Usos

Multiples Estela Rios”<sup>51</sup> at CASOTA the night before by a young activist-artist from the collective. The banner consisted of two mirror images, applied with spray paint and a stencil, of Triqui women wearing bright red huipiles, which are part of the traditional dress the Triquis are known for. The women are holding infants close to their chest with shawls. In the middle of the two woman is a faceless prisoner behind bars with their arm sticking through the prison bars, fist raised in the air- presumably representing Copala’s political prisoners. Above the images read the words “RESPETO A LA AUTONOMIA DE SAN JUAN COPALA” (RESPECT THE AUTONOMY OF SAN JUAN COPALA; (Figure 44). The imagery of indigenous women playing the maternal role is common in the protest art of the Oaxacan social movement. The implication seems to be that they represent “el pueblo”- in this case the Autonomous pueblo of San Juan Copala. This gendered and racialized imagery is not without its problems, of course. Such images elicit notions of victimization and helplessness and tie them to the body of indigenous women. The metaphor of the indigenous woman as nurturing mother, steward of culture, tradition, and the private sphere, have a long history in Mexico. Anthropologist Deborah Poole draws the connection between gender, dress and tradition in imagery of *Tehuanas* (woman from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec) in early 20<sup>th</sup> century photography when she notes:

the familiar bond between women, tradition and place (in the form of home, region, community, or nation) is intimately related to a parallel division of labor between men as the reasoned associates of a universal modernity and woman as

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<sup>51</sup> Estela Rios was one of the woman who founded the organization of woman who took over the radio stations in 2006. She died in 2008 after a battle with cancer.

embodiment of the particularist cultural and geographic allegiances that feed modern nationalist and regionalist sentiments (2004:68-69).

The images of the Triqui women on the banner reproduce the trope that associates women with tradition and place, while challenging the tradition of *indigenismo* in Mexico, represented most famously in art by the “Big Three” muralists of Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros and José Clemente Orozco. Through the national program of *indigenismo* the post-revolutionary Mexican state constructed a cultural nationalism described by Edward McCaughan as glorifying “magnificent indigenous civilizations of the past while ignoring the poverty and exploitation of Indians in the present” (McCaughan 2012:15). Much of the art associated with the social movement of 2006 seeks to call attention to contemporary struggles of Oaxaca’s indigenous communities and therefore follows art that emerged alongside the political organizing of the COCEI in 1970s, 80s and 90s that focused on the struggle of Zapotecs in the Isthmus (McCaughan 2012; Rubin 1997).





Figure 44: "Respect the Autonomy of San Juan Copala." Photo credit: Author

Returning to the occupation of Cinco Señores, the biggest tension between the drivers and activists occurred when a middle-aged male teacher spray-painted “Ulises get out!” (*Fuera Ulises!*) onto one of the buses. The bus driver was immediately enraged, coming to our group (composed mostly of VOCAL and CASOTA members) to complain. By this time it was around midafternoon and having just arrived, the teacher missed the plea that one of VOCAL activists had made to the larger group earlier that morning that the buses be left untouched since the drivers were “proletariat brothers” and they, not the “elitist owners” would have to pay for any damage. He called the teacher over and asked him if he had done what the driver accused him of and he replied, “What does it matter?” The youth told him that the drivers had been cooperating all day and that the activists had promised that the buses would be left untouched. The teacher was not pleased by this concession and merely responded by cussing and walking away. At this point the driver was visibly frustrated and kept repeating that it would take him hours to

remove the graffiti and that this was not part of the agreement. The rest of the drivers, who had stayed together for most of the day, looked on disconcertedly. The young activist apologized to the driver and assured him that the teacher was not part of their group and that they would clean his bus for him. The driver was not happy but seemed to believe him and walked back with the rest of the drivers.

Shortly after the incident with the spray-painted bus, reporters from local commercial and alternative media showed up for a press conference held on the east side of the intersection. Representatives from the collectives and organizations took turns recounting their group's reasons for participating in the roadblock that day, giving various degrees of historical background for the Triqui struggle for autonomy, the deaths of Jyri and Bety and the threats made to the members of the present caravan en route to San Juan Copala.



Figure 45: Press conference, activist from organization of street vendors speaking. Photo credit: Author



Figure 46: Press conference. Photo credit: Author



Figure 47: Press conference, VOCAL activist speaking. Photo credit: Author

Around 5 pm the news came in that the police and military refused to guarantee the safety of the caravan in the face of repeated paramilitary threats. The Autonomous Municipality of San Juan Copala issued a plea to the organizers of the caravan to abandon their efforts. The community could not bear the weight of any more martyrs. Upon learning of this news, various members of each group met in the middle of the intersection and discussed the next move. The decision was made to lift the blockade and march back to the *zócalo* and hold a meeting there to discuss further actions. Once it was decided that everyone would march back to the encampments together and meet in a larger assembly there, the various spokespeople relayed the decision to their groups and inform the bus and truck drivers that they were free to take their vehicles. Everyone gathered their things (banners, sound equipment, etc), the buses and trucks left and everyone began to march with their respective groups. Left behind was an intersection with various messages imprinted on its stoplights and light posts: “*copala lo apoya el pueblo*” (el pueblo supports copala), “*justicia para copala*” (justice for copala) and “*Bety y Jyri Viven*” (long-live Bety and Jyri). The graffiti and charred remnants of the campaign materials were left behind as testaments of that day’s actions.



Figure 48: Campaign materials being burned. Photo credit: Author.



Figure 49: "The People Support Copala." Photo credit: Author

Soon after the march began, the chants began: *“Oaxaca no es cuartel/ fuera ejercito de el!”* (Oaxaca is not a military base/ military get out of here!), *“Copala no es cuartel/ fuera paramilitares de el!”* (Copala is not a military base/ paramilitaries get out the there!) and *“autonomia/ autogestión/ autodefensa para la revolución!”* (autonomy/

self-management/ self-defense for the revolution!). Next came the chant that made me realize how cathartic chants can be as dozens of Jyri and Bety's friends chanted "*Jyri no murio/ Ulises lo mato! Bety no murio/ Ulises la mato!*" (Jyri did not die/ Ulises killed him! Bety did not die/ Ulises killed her!").

After marching for about ten blocks, we noticed that the rear of the march was not keeping up with those of us towards the front. People began to yell for them to catch up so that traffic would not split us into smaller groups. There was some commotion as those in the back seemed to be refusing to proceed. A woman I recognized as being a vocal participant in several of the assemblies that day was very upset and refused to continue towards the zócalo. She was clutching her cell phone and yelling frantically that her daughter was left alone at the intersection. The number of protesters at that point had swelled to about two hundred so it was difficult for me to make out exactly what was happening but a couple of VOCAL activists were trying to convince her that everyone needed to stay together in order to reach the zócalo safely. She and one of the young men from the Liberatory Black Block refused, and she yelled at her would be persuaders, "You all can go wherever the fuck you want but we are going back to the intersection!" They tried one last attempt to keep the group together, arguing that if we split up the police and/or paramilitaries would start picking people up. Again they refused, so the march split into several smaller sections.

Again we see the lack of vertical structure leading to debate, discussion, and modification taking place in practice. This does not necessarily lead to the most efficient actions, for example here when groups begin to splinter but does allow groups to maintain autonomy over their actions. The debate lasted for about ten minutes, in the

middle of a busy street, during rush hour traffic. Not wanting to be standing around when the police or paramilitaries showed up, several smaller groups of people had already split off from the march. The Liberatory Black Block along with some others returned to the intersection while our group of about thirty-five or forty VOCAL and CASOTA activists and another forty or so street vendors marched on towards the zócalo.

We arrived at the zócalo and marched through the various encampments, weaving through the narrow corridors created by the space in between the rainbow of tarps the different union delegations and other groups had erected until we reached the gazebo at the center of the plaza. There was a level of chaos in our groups, with people making phone calls, others having heated exchanges about what had happened mid-march, while others scrambled to different parts of the encampment looking for answers. I found Mónica and asked her what happened. She told me that two people had stayed behind with some audio equipment but that they were now missing. One of them, Yuri, was the daughter of the woman who had refused to march on and the other was a middle-aged man named Efrain who sometimes participated in CASOTA events.

No one from CASOTA could get Efrain on the phone. The mother, who it turned out was a teacher, showed up at the zócalo and began filling the rest of us in on what had happened. Yuri had called her frantically from a bus and told her that she and Efrain were supposed to be picked up, along with the audio equipment, by a friend with a truck but that before he showed up, two pick-up trucks full of men surrounded them. They immediately started beating Efrain with clubs or metal pipes. They hit him in the head and swarmed on him once he hit the ground. They were yelling, “You are fucking *appos* (derogatory way of referring to members of the APPO) aren’t you? We don’t want any

fucking *appos* in Oaxaca!” One of them tried to grab her but she managed to get away but not before they struck her in the shoulder. She ran towards the now flowing traffic and got on a bus. She saw the men throw Efrain in one of the trucks. Soon Yuri was in the safety of the occupied *zócalo* telling a reporter her story.

After Yuri’s mom telling us the story of the attack on her daughter and Efrain, an assembly-style meeting broke out. Many details about the day’s action were discussed and debated with the people who had served as representatives during the action getting things started, but soon others were chiming in. At one point a young man who belongs to VOCAL and is often outspoken at meetings like this was getting into a heated exchange with a middle-aged woman who was repeatedly arguing that we had messed up and that was why Yuri and Efrain were attacked. He agreed but wanted to move the discussion beyond blaming and towards solutions. Every time they repeated their points, they both got more frustrated with the other. After a while the young man was overpowering the woman with his voice and presence to the point where she could not get any words in. A young woman from VOCAL intervened, telling him that he wasn’t being respectful by interrupting the woman and he conceded the word back to the woman. After she repeated her point again, another young woman from VOCAL asked if everyone agreed that no matter what no one should ever be left behind after or during an action. Several people audibly agreed, no one argued and the consensus was reached. If equipment needed to be picked up, it would be picked up while there was still a mass presence. Several moments when activists were vulnerable that day were identified and solutions agreed upon. Other issues discussed were the appropriate ways to ask for donations for printing flyers during an action. Several of the youth from the one of the organizations were accused of



misusing the name of the APPO for soliciting money from people during the roadblock. This was a contentious issue because a physical altercation almost took place during the day when the outspoken young man from VOCAL questioned the other youth about passing a non-sealed container around for donations to passers by during the roadblock. One of the young men became very hostile and began to threaten the VOCAL activist of calling him a thief. The issue was not resolved until the zócalo assembly when the issue was raised again. A young woman from VOCAL suggested that only *sealed* containers be used when asking for donations and that they not be passed around during roadblocks to avoid the impression that people can buy their way through the roadblock. The assembly agreed on this point with little discussion as it seems that this may have been discussed previously. Ultimately, the assembly lasted over an hour but consensus was reached on several important issues such as the issue of donations and of not leaving anyone behind after direct-actions.

Different activists took turns throughout the evening standing guard at CASOTA in case Efrain showed up, which he did. The paramilitaries dumped him in a colonia near downtown and a good Samaritan picked him up and took him to CASOTA. He was taken to a nearby hospital where he was treated for his injuries and released late that night. VOCAL and CASOTA activists regrouped at CASOTA after the assembly. There, people made phone calls, sent text messages, listened to the radio and checked the internet for news on the caravan and to disseminate their own news about the day's events. They had another smaller meeting at the house reviewing the day's events and agreed on having another meeting the next day to discuss further Copala-related actions after a night's rest.

## *Conclusion*

Through the two events described in this chapter- the defense of urban territory in response to state violence on February 15, 2011 and the direct-action in solidarity with San Juan Copala on June 8, 2010- we can see some of the ways in which an ethnographic focus on space gives the researcher a unique window into social movement continuity, structure and process that approaches that do not synthesize both structural and cultural parameters miss. For example, understanding the ways in which the political culture and organizing structure of autonomous youth collectives were exercised in space during the actions on June 8<sup>th</sup> sheds light on both the continuity of activism and the ways in which their activism is still being experimented with and honed. Their collective experiences commandeering buses and defending occupied urban territory during the social movement of 2006 was very much on display during the roadblock that day. Likewise, the fact that they are still learning how to enact their horizontal politics was clear with some of the miscues that day, including most dramatically the beating and kidnapping of Efrain.

The fact that this loose network of groups was able to network across difference and successfully take one of the most important intersections in Oaxaca in 2010 is nothing less than spectacular. Oaxaca post-2006 is heavily militarized and many of the collectives involved, especially VOCAL and CASOTA, are under regular police surveillance. This is where the relatively small size of the affinity groups makes them very hard to infiltrate and easy to underestimate. The same aspects that can lead to miscues also provide a fluidity that more “cumbersome” structures like the APPO assembly or teachers’ union lack. Even though Sección 22 was not present as an

organization in the roadblock and march, their impact on organizing in Oaxaca was still crucial for the success of that day's actions. For example, the organizing space of the zócalo, which was a key to the logistics of planning and regrouping that day, was provided by the union's ritual of its yearly encampment. Without that important space, the direct action would have been much more difficult to execute. Also important to note is that by connecting the organizing space of the zócalo with that of Cinco Señores, which became a key installation for horizontal action during the social movement of 2006, youth and allied groups are actively remapping the landscape of Oaxacan politics- adding key public spaces to the already rich cartography of resistance found in the city. This also shows how the collective experience of 2006 continues to inform activists' use of public space- what before 2006 may have been just a busy intersection, has now become a site of popular political power. This brings me back to the quote from David of VOCAL that I opened Chapter V with, "Before 2006 it was someone else's street. After 2006, it became our street. We see our space differently now."

The defense of urban territory during Calderon's visit on February 15, 2011 is a great example of the importance networks of counter-spaces that consist of both spaces of direct-action and more territorialized activist spaces like CASOTA and Estación Cero. Youth were able to respond as quickly as they did to the attacks against teachers because many were nearby at youth-run spaces like CASOTA and Estación Cero. These spaces are especially important because they allow youth from isolated colonias to make their presence felt in the symbolic and physical center of the city. They also give youth a sense of ownership of the city that even their parents or grandparents may not have. On several occasions I heard youth say that older members of their family rarely ever went to, or had

never even been to, the historic city center. As Erick of CASOTA made clear in the previous chapter, this strategy of finding a location in the city center was a conscious effort to challenge working-class peoples' invisibility. Both events also show the importance of having central spaces like CASOTA vis-à-vis repression. During both events, CASOTA served as a safe space for activists to retreat to.

Youth continue to draw on their experiences in the barricades and in their smaller collectives in order to create a mobile horizontal model that mixes spontaneous direct-action with consensus-driven decision-making. The directly-democratic form of participation provided by the barricades in 2006 and in direct-actions like those described in this chapter appeals much more to the youth than vertical structures where they are often excluded and dismissed. Through constructing their own forms of participation, Oaxacan youth, much like youth did in the #Occupy Everywhere Movements, enact their directly-democratic norms onto fluid structures which are inscribed onto their physical environment, particularly urban space so that claiming public space becomes part-and-parcel of their political norms, practices and organization.

## CHAPTER VIII

### BIOGRAPHICAL VIGNETTE: MARE

Mare ‘Advertencia Lirika’ (‘Lyrical Warning’) is a pioneering rapper in the Oaxacan hip-hop scene. She is an active member of VOCAL and several other collectives like Mujeres Trabajando (Woman at Work), which is a national woman’s hip-hop and arts collective. She is in her mid-20s and grew up in one of Oaxaca’s popular neighborhoods. Here is how she describes herself on her Facebook fan page:

Mare Advertencia Lirika: woman, Zapotec. Rapper born in Oaxaca.

Mare uses her Rap as a tool for awakening minds and strengthening networks within the Oaxacan social movement and elsewhere. She also looks to eradicate the condition of inequality that exists for woman in society, which has led her to work with diverse groups and social organizations nationally and internationally...currently she continues to work on her solo rap project, projects that support the community, giving workshops on dance, rap and hip-hop culture, as well as collaborating on other musical projects.

Mare leaves no room for doubt that her music, identity and activism are all inseparable pieces that define her. Mare and I sat down at a local coffee shop in early 2011 for an interview. At the time I had known her for just over a year so we had already had many informal conversations. We ended up talking for just over 2 hours and discussed everything from the history of hip-hop in Mexico, the social movement of 2006 and Mare’s own biography. Her life story offers a glimpse into how art and activism intertwine in the lives of young people, especially those who come from marginalized communities and whose art is itself marginal.

Her politicization began at an early age when her father was murdered following an agrarian dispute and her mother was forced to move her and her siblings to the city from their town in the Sierra Norte region of Oaxaca. In 1992 they settled in what Mare calls “a new colonia” on the outskirts of the city. Mare remembers being struck by the contradiction between the nationalism that was being promoted in school and the realities she saw in her colonia. This was a time of radical economic liberalization in Mexico marked by multiple devaluations of the peso and massive austerity measures, such as an end to import substitution and guaranteed price supports for Mexican agricultural producers and cuts in subsidies for basic food, decreased funding for health care and education (Ros and Lustig 2003). The end of state support for subsistence farming forced many small and medium scale farmers to migrate to national and international urban centers. The simultaneity of urbanization and neoliberal austerity in Mexico, and throughout Latin America, led to the burgeoning shantytowns populated by a growing informal working class lacking public supports or infrastructure (Fernandes 2010).

It is in this context of economic and social crisis, that her family had to cope with the murder of her father. Her older sister and younger brother both developed medical and mental health issues related to his death and their mother had to work long hours to provide for them. Mare had to assume a great deal of responsibility at a young age becoming the one to take care of the house and was therefore very aware of the economic difficulties that her family and neighbors faced in their daily lives. At this time she also began reciting poetry in school, she became very animated when she described this to me:

I began reciting poetry when I was in second grade...but it was always very positive poetry, romantic poems about love, but when I was in fourth grade a girl who was in the sixth grade recited a poem that was an adaptation of *México Creo en Ti* (Mexico I Believe in You), which is a very popular poem in Mexico, but she recited an adaptation that was called *México No Creo en Ti* (Mexico I Do Not Believe in You). That poem was very critical- we are talking about 1995 more or less, during the crisis here in Mexico and this poem criticized the inflation of prices, it was very critical of this campaign that was going on at the time of everyone being so proud of being Mexican, everyone united with Mexico, together we will make Mexico grow and overcome the crisis and blah blah blah. So that poem was very critical of all of that and that was the poem that changed my life. When I heard that adaptation [of the poem] I was studying in a public school, I lived in a new colonia where there wasn't even the basic services like water and electricity, the roads weren't paved, there was no transportation, there was no healthcare in the community. So that poem was telling my reality. It told my story and like I said, I became my mother's right hand so I knew how much everything cost, what the household expenses were, what we could afford and what we couldn't. I realized all of these things at a very early age and it all made me see things in a different light...that there were reasons that my family was struggling. This poem contextualized a Mexico in crisis and that is how it changed my life. That poem really did change my life.

Here we see a great example of how popular culture, poetry in this case, can be a site for self-discovery, realization, and politicization- especially for youth (Clay 2012). Stuart

Hall, discussing Black popular culture, emphasized this point, “popular culture...is where we discover and play with identifications of ourselves, where we are imagined, where we are represented... to ourselves for the first time” (Quoted in Clay 2012:96). For Mare this was certainly the case, as she explicitly remembers that hearing the critical adaptation of the popular poem was a life-changing event for her, where she was able to hear her own story and doubts expressed for the first time. She traces her career as an emcee to her love of poetry. Shortly after she began reciting poems in school, however, one of her teachers told her that she should stop because of her speech impediment. Admittedly crushed by this, she abandoned reciting poetry but kept writing and searching for poems, especially poetry of protest like *México No Creo en Ti*, which resonated with the disillusion she felt about the realities of life in her colonia.

Around the same time (mid-1990s) she was searching for poetry, she was exposed to hip-hop culture in her colonia:

When my sister began middle school, she is 3 years older than me, when she begins middle school Oaxaca is experiencing its graffiti ‘boom.’ So my first contact with hip-hop is through graffiti. Suddenly it was what was different, what was in style, what was cool. At the same time there was a lot of ignorance because many people saw it as only painting, as a something for cholos, even the kids who were painting were saying, “We paint because we are cholos.” So it carried with it that stigma of being something very radical, something bad, something rebellious, it has to be done illegally, that is how it has to be. I begin to see it because of migration, that is how it arrives to the colonia where I live, when we moved there 18 years ago it was a new colonia. So that was part of it as well, people were



coming from the communities to live in the city, but they lived in the peripheries, in the new colonias. So at this time there were also a lot of people returning from *el norte* [the U.S.] and they came to reside in the city and they brought with them this idea of this being a barrio thing, of how it was in the United States...and then the music [rap] starts to seep into Oaxaca too but not very much because the culture here in Oaxaca is very conservative, the people are very closed, they try and preserve their traditions but with that also comes passing judgment on what is new and not allowing the new things to enter. But graffiti starts to arrive in Oaxaca and then a little bit of rap too but when it arrives it is distorted and it becomes even more distorted because of the stigmas associated with it in the city.

When I begin to see graffiti, I also start to hear rap.

Through Mare's biography we see the importance that the confluence of migration, urbanization and return migration played in shaping the social context of her artistic development and the development of hip-hop in Oaxaca. For example, she identifies the flow of people and culture that comes with migration- both between the U.S. and Mexico and from rural communities in Oaxaca to the city- as playing a prominent role in the emergence of hip-hop culture, in this case graffiti and rap music, in the colonias of Oaxaca. She also talks about the stigma associated with hip-hop as being very "radical" "rebellious" and "illegal." Later I asked her what specifically attracted her to the music and in her response she repeats how she was told not to recite poetry because of her speech impediment but how rap was much more flexible and accessible:

It's something you can do with very little money. It's something that really caught my attention because I used to write poetry, I really liked poetry of protest. But...

when I was in middle school they told me that I wasn't any good at reciting, so I gave up on poetry. It was very harsh to have my teacher tell me that I was no good because of my speech impediment. So that part was very hard for me and that's when I start getting really into rap, because it was also something that you didn't need to have a particular kind of training for, a special voice or way of saying things or that it has to sound nice. It was something homemade [*casero*], something very grimy. You could do so many things with it, which is what I loved about it- actually that's what I still love about it. You can truly make whatever you want out of rap, it doesn't have to have one particular rhythm, it doesn't have to sound nice or have one kind of structure... So I really started liking the wordplay, and how in groups you hear a voice and then another one very different from the first and then all of a sudden another. I loved the way you could mix things together.

Mare's response here reveals several common themes that emerged when I interviewed artists about their experiences with hip-hop and street art: 1) alienating experiences with authorities at a young age; 2) the artistic freedom and democratic nature of their art form; and 3) the economic and artistic accessibility of hip-hop and street art. In the chapter that follows I will elaborate on these themes and show how youths' trajectories as artists have greatly informed their politics and have indeed facilitated their entrée into activism. More specifically, I will show how hip-hop culture has played a prominent role in youths' spatial sensibilities.



Figure 50: Mare performing at memorial for Jyri Antero Jakkola at CASOTA. Photo credit: Author



Figure 51: Mare performing in Mexico City with her collective Mujeres Trabajando. Photo credit. Mare Advertencia Lirika



Figure 52: Mare and other members of VOCAL in procession ahead of Guelaguetza Popular 2010. Photo credit: Susy Chávez Herrera

## CHAPTER IX

### THE BARRIO COMES FIRST: OAXACAN STREET ART AND THE REMAPPING OF URBAN SPACE

The street belongs to those that work it!  
Guerrilla Visual (Oaxacan Graffiti artist)

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#### *Introduction*

In this chapter, I examine the intersection between the politics of public space, cultural production, and activism to address the multiple ways in which the emerging political cultures being constructed by youth in Oaxaca heavily incorporate cultural production and how cultural production plays a large part in how youth are reconfiguring the city and remaking urban space. In addition to their roles as barricader@s and popular security forces, youth played prominent roles in the social movement of 2006 through their cultural production, especially graffiti and street art. This art served tactical functions like announcing movement mobilizations and disseminating other important news, as well as serving the symbolic function of signaling, to local and foreign audiences, the movement's control of the city. In addition, I argue, youth collectives associated with the social movement of 2006 have effectively used these (and other) cultural forms to help sustain activism through the ebbs and flows of movement activity as well as across time and space. They have done so, in part, by using visual art and music to create and thicken connections between communities, groups and movements, traversing borders and scales in the process (urban/rural, urban/urban, or local/regional/global).

The political culture of the current generation of autonomous youth activists in Oaxaca is perhaps nowhere more visible and tangible than in the intersection of cultural production and public space. The youth cultural production I examine here tends to take place through spaces forged by collectives that identify on some level with libertarian or autonomist politics based in part on anti-authoritarianism, collectivity, urban citizenship and working-class identities. These spaces created by youth provide them with avenues for social participation and for those inclined they can serve as entrées into political activism. For example, street artists played a crucial role in the social movement of 2006 as they used their art as a grassroots medium of communication.

Building on the histories and arguments laid down in previous chapters, I will focus on spaces of youth participation vis-à-vis street art, hip-hop and punk in the years prior to the social movement of 2006, during the social movement, and in the years since. In doing so, I will demonstrate how the struggles over public space vis-à-vis youth cultural production that were dramatically manifest during the social movement of 2006 actually predate the movement. Moreover, I will show how youth help create and maintain networks of counter-spaces and oppositional political cultures through their cultural practices, while also laying claim to urban citizenship rights, such as collective use of urban space.

My research on cultural production vis-à-vis youth activism is based on in-depth interviews and group interviews with 10 graffiteros (street artists) that represent four active crews (Arte Jaguar, AK Crew, Vandal Horror Skuad and Stencil Zone), as well as multiple in-depth interviews with Mare and countless informal conversations with these youth and others in their networks. In addition, I spent a great deal of time conducting

participant observation at artists' spaces, at cultural events, mobilizations and was invited to participate in street art projects with graffiteros. Through these multiple methods, I was able to witness firsthand how artists work, interact with each other, with other activists, elders and the built environment. The rapport I was able to establish allowed me to get at some of the tensions within the street art community and some of the more nuanced meanings behind their art, which I will elaborate on in this chapter.

### ***Benito Juárez, Jaguars, Punks and Hip-hop***

Traditionally hip-hop is thought to consist of four elements: emceeing (rapping), DJ-ing, graffiti and b-boying (breaking or breakdancing) (Schloss 2009). Most of my discussion of hip-hop cultural production in this research refers to the music and the visual art form. I do not, however, limit my discussion of the latter to graffiti. This is because most of the visual artists in my study incorporate methods that traditionalists in the graffiti community do not accept as graffiti- the stencil is a prime example. Following hip-hop scholars like Michael Jefferies (2011) and Lorenzo Perillo (2013), I acknowledge that the tried-and-true formula of hip-hop as four elements imposes a static vision on a vibrant, dynamic and increasingly global cultural form. Likewise, I argue that limiting hip-hop visual art to a narrowly defined conception of graffiti does not respect the progression of the art form. To avoid misunderstandings, however, I speak of the broader genre of street art, which includes graffiti, wheatpaste<sup>52</sup>, stencils, posters, stickers and murals (see Figures 53, 54, and 55).

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<sup>52</sup> Wheatpaste in the context of street art refers to a technique used by artists where an image is produced on paper ahead of time and then applied on a wall or other exterior surface with a homemade paste. Posters are often applied in the same manner.



Figure 53: Artists applying wheatpaste over existing graffiti. Photo credit: Retro



Figure 54: Stencil being applied during a march. Photo credit: Author





Figure 55: Wildstyle graffiti piece by Serckas (VHS Crew and AK Crew). Photo credit: Serckas

Most of the visual artists in this study practice multiple forms of street art but began with graffiti and refer to themselves as *graffiteros*. I chose not to translate *graffiteros* into the English ‘graffiti-writers’ because I feel that *graffitero* captures their multidisciplinary in a way that the English translation does not. Also, it is important to note that many *graffiteros* have been greatly impacted by hip-hop culture vis-à-vis their sensibilities and aesthetics but many have also been impacted by punk culture. In fact, early graffiti in Oaxaca was practiced by youth who identified as punks, listened to punk music and only later began listening to rap music (in fact a minority of *graffiteros* in my study actually do not listen to rap at all). For this reason I think it important to recognize that hip-hop and punk cultures, like all cultures, are fluid, dynamic and there is overlap between them.

Of the ten *graffiteros* I interviewed, nine were raised in the city and all but one of these grew up in a colonia on the outskirts of the city. One of them grew up in the center

of the city and the other one migrated to a colonia as a teenager from a Mixtec town in the Mixtec region of Oaxaca. Those that grew up in the city recalled growing up seeing graffiti in their neighborhoods, but not the big intricate pieces known in the graffiti world as bombs or wildstyle (Figure 55 above). The graffiti in those days was more basic in terms of form, mostly tags (Figure 56), Anarchist symbols (Figure 57), the names of punk bands, the commemoration of historical events like October 2 (date of the massacre of students at Tlatelolco), or the names of political organizations.



Figure 56: Basic Tag in Oaxaca. Photo credit: Author

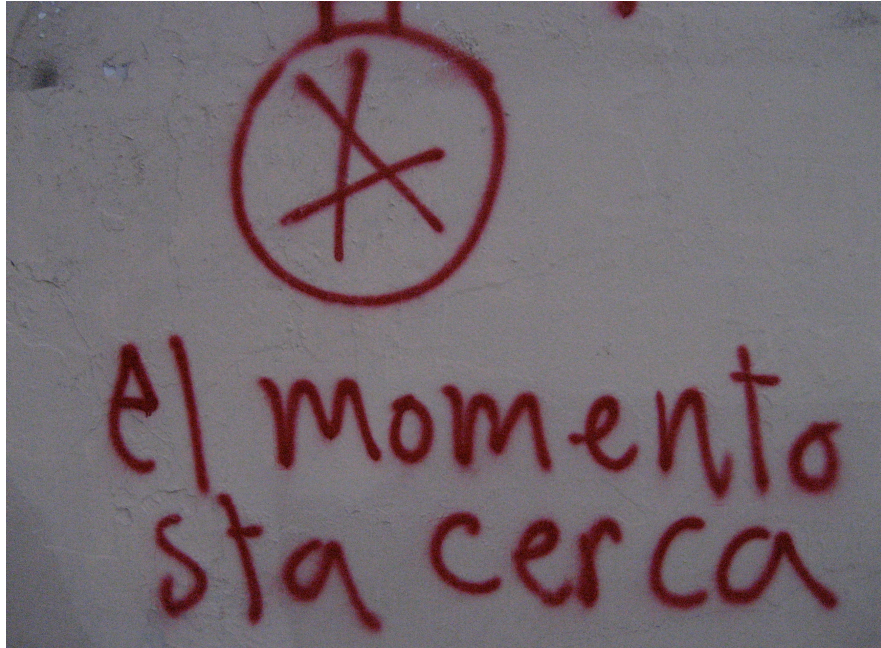


Figure 57: “Anarchism: the moment is near.” Photo credit: Author

For many of the youth now involved in the more overtly political street art, the punk movement in Mexico was their first frame of reference in terms of a rebellious subculture. The punk scene in Mexico City is especially strong and has been prominent since the 1970s (Hernández 2011), but the southern states of Oaxaca and Guerrero also have rich histories of politically active punk movements (García Leyva 2005).

The confluence of punk, hip-hop and youth activism is visible through the local history of a popularly reproduced image in Oaxaca deemed by youth, “el Juárez Punk.” This image portrays Benito Juárez in full punk disguise- leather jacket with metal spikes, Mohawk hairdo, and a nose-ring (Figure 58 and 59).



Figure 58: (Left) Drawing of Benito Juárez Punk. Photo Credit: [blingcheese.com](http://blingcheese.com)  
(Right) Benito Juárez Punk Stencil by Vain of Arte Jaguar. Photo credit: [webserial.com](http://webserial.com)



Figure 59: Variation of "el Juárez punk" by Smek (Arte Jaguar and AK Crew). Photo credit: Smek.

Benito Juárez was president of Mexico in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He was a Zapotec from the Sierra Norte region of Oaxaca and was the first Indigenous president of the Americas and as of now the only indigenous president of Mexico. Having seen this image stenciled on walls in Oaxaca and silkscreened on t-shirts, I asked Retro, an artist from CASOTA about the history of the image. He told me that the first time he saw the image stenciled in Oaxaca was by an artist named Smek. I interviewed Smek in 2011 and asked him what the image meant to him:

There is a very famous quote of his that says “Peace is respecting the rights of others.” Well that is the last part of a larger phrase but I thought it would be cool to retake the image [el Juárez punk]. I say retake because it had already been created. But every time when I would go out to paint, or when we would go out to paint illegally or legally, the police always showed up to fuck with us man. [They would say] “You can’t do that. What the hell do youth think you are doing? What you are doing is bullshit! Don’t do it, it’s visual pollution!” And we would say, “Well we have the right to express what we feel too”

Maurice: So they didn’t arrest you back then?

Smek: Yes, of course they did! But I think the punk Mohawk has always had a connection to the rebelliousness of youth...so I thought it was cool to recreate it and in addition to that, I claimed that image because I had seen it one time when I went to Mexico City and I saw the image on a patch at a punk flea market. It was Benito Juárez with his punk Mohawk and I thought “You have got to be kidding me, that is so badass!” So immediately I bought that fucking punk patch and then

I am looking through some books and I saw a photograph by an artist whose name I can't remember right now, but it's a photograph from the 70s and there is a punk inside his bedroom sitting on his bed with his *caguama* [32 ounce bottle of beer], behind him you see his records and there are drawings on the wall and there it is, el Juárez punk. And this photo is from Ciudad Juárez! So I thought, "Damn this is bad ass! How from the North all the way to here, one can identify with that kind of symbol." So that's how it came about. For me what's important is not necessarily originality, rather it's about producing images on the spot, when there is that need, when it's necessary, then you create it, and that's how it came about. I enjoyed it a lot.

The history that Smek recounted of how the image of "el Juárez punk" circulated is fascinating- how the image of the Zapotec president of Mexico from Oaxaca's Sierra Norte traveled to Northern border town of named in his honor, Ciudad Juárez, where it was remade into a punk symbol and scrawled onto a bedroom wall and then remade as a punk patch in the streets of Mexico City, only to return to Oaxaca in the form of protest art stenciled on public walls and sold to tourists on silk-screened t-shirts during occupations of the zócalo. I find it prudent here to heed García Canclini's call to consider not only cultural objects or "the act of production but every the step in the productive process: *production, circulation and reception*"(1993:13). In this case this means recognizing that the social processes and context involved in the varied deployments of Benito Juárez. The Mexican state, for example, hails him as the great liberal leader who expelled the French who invaded Mexico in the 1860s. While we cannot know what the image of Benito Juárez punk meant for the young man in the photograph or the punks

who sold Smek the patch, we do know that for him the image represented a critical commentary on police surveillance, private property and the lack of spaces available for youth to express themselves.

In the context of the Oaxacan social movement, several other historical figures have received the punk treatment by street artists including Mexican revolutionaries Ricardo Flores Magón (Figure 60), and Emiliano Zapata (Figure 61), as well as Mexican artist and icon Frida Khalo (see Figure 62). I asked CASOTA artist Retro what the meaning of the Magón punk was for him and he replied, “Magón was a great revolutionary and anarchist from here in Oaxaca and the punk Mohawk has always had a connotation of rebelliousness and of youth struggle so ‘Magón punk’ is way to bring them together in one image.”



Figure 60: Magón Punk. Photo credit: CASOTA



Figure 61: Zapata Punk. Photo credit: Yeskas (ASARO)



Figure 62: Frida Punk. Photo credit: Yeskas (ASARO)



Just as the image of Benito Juárez has undergone various resignifications, so too has graffiti in Oaxaca. As I mentioned earlier, graffiti in Oaxaca emerged originally as a form of expression more closely associated with punk culture, but with increased migration and circulation of hip-hop popular culture from the United States, came the association of graffiti with hip-hop. In some ways Smek and his older brother Cer exemplify this confluence of graffiti, punk and hip-hop culture. They began painting graffiti after a friend who was into punk brought them back photographs and sketches of graffiti from Mexico City, which they found fascinating. They both had received informal artistic training from an uncle who was a painter. Smek later went on to receive further training at the *Escuela de Bellas Artes* (the School of Fine Arts at UABJO, herein *Bellas Artes*) where he participated in various workshops and then in 2006 he was accepted at the prestigious national fine arts school in Mexico City called *La Escuela Nacional de Pintura, Escultura y Grabado “La Esmeralda”* (National Academy for Painting, Sculpture and Etching). Cer studied architecture and has no formal art training. However, they began their graffiti careers when Smek was still in middle school and Cer was in high school [late 1990s].

When Smek was in high school he formed a collective with other youth from his colonia, Pueblo Nuevo, and called the collective El Muro (The Wall). They painted in the streets and put together a punk fanzine where they reproduced articles, poetry and other texts related to “social issues and politics” and distributed them to other youth free of charge. The punk subculture is commonly described as following a DIY or Do-It-Yourself ethic. Sociologists Ryan Moore and Michael Roberts argue that an important part of this ethic is the rejection of consumerism and the promoting of grassroots self-

sufficiency in production and reception by creating alternative forms of cultural production that are autonomous from the culture industry and mainstream media (2009). The grassroots production of fanzines is a hallmark example of punk DIY. In Oaxaca several punk and libertarian groups, like CESOL (one of the groups that participated in BARL and the Okupa in 2006), have been involved in their production for many years. Montes Liberadas and another CESOL activist names Erick<sup>53</sup> remembered producing fanzines in the late 1990s.

Several years after Smek and Cer began experimenting with graffiti, they founded what would become two of the most influential graffiti and street crews in Oaxaca- Arte Jaguar and AK Crew. Smek described the formation of these crews, how they changed over time and the choice of the name AK Crew:

When I was at *Bellas Artes* already having the experience of forming the other crew, I said to some friends, “Let’s start a collective!”...so in the graphics workshop at *Bellas Artes* we started Arte Jaguar [2004], which at the time was like 12 people. But it was weird at first because before that I had only worked with banda from the graffiti crew, straight up banda from the barrio. It was a much cooler vibe. You felt that there was actually the conviction and desire to make the crew come up. For example, we started the S.F. and there were four of us who participated in it. It was all S.F., always painting in all the streets, all day it was S.F. And then we decided we had to do something even bigger, we have to unite with other crews, so we formed Arte Kallejero [circa 2000-2002; name

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<sup>53</sup> Not the same Erick from CASOTA.

translates to Street Art more frequently referred to as AK Crew], which was one of the heaviest crews here in Oaxaca.

Maurice: And what does S.F. stand for?

Smek: It was Sin Fronteras [Without Borders]...but then we found out that there was an S.F. in Mexico City. There were already some graffiteros over there painting and it stood for Sin Fronteras too. We said, “Even though we are painting over here they are going to get all the credit because they are in the center.” So we decided we would form a different crew and that was how we formed AK, which had various meanings. We connected it more with the whole thing about the weapon, the AK 47 because of its role with the guerrillas. The image that was associated with the guerrilla but we thought that our thing was more urban, more street so it had various other names, Arte Kallejero [Street Art], Arte Kultura y Aerosol [Art Culture and Aerosol], Arte Klandestino [Clandestine Art], Amotación Kallejeras [Street Rebellion]. So it had various names and it was with various banda. And then we formed another crew that was called Resistencia Aborigen de Insurgencia Zapatista [Indigenous Resistance of Zapatista Insurgency] which we called RAIZ [root or origen] and that was a shitload of banda because it included crews from all different parts of Oaxaca and there was even banda that didn't even scribe, they would just pick up a can and put their tag...the point was to get a shitload of people to participate.

Through the formation of these various crews, they brought together other existing graffiti and street art crews throughout the city and began painting in different colonias and in the center of the city. In the names of the crews the emphasis on the streets and a

revolutionary or at least rebellious spirit is clear. With the crew RAIZ, for example, Oaxacan graffiteros are paying homage to the struggle of the Zapatistas in Chiapas and other indigenous struggles, as well as creating their own spaces for working class youth participation. This is evident in the fact that they were not concerned primarily with the quality of work produced but rather in facilitating the involvement of their peers. Or as Smek put it, “the point was to get a shitload of people to participate.”

Some of these crews only lasted a few months, but Arte Jaguar has been active for almost a decade and AK has endured for even longer, although they have gone through a lot of changes in terms of active members. Arte Jaguar, for example, a crew that began with 12 artists is currently a crew of four active members. Although some members of Arte Jaguar and AK studied art together at *Bellas Artes*, others had no formal training and were introduced to the crews through spaces like those created by projects like RAIZ that recruited in the colonias. Yet others met at graffiti competitions that the state government sponsored through the Institute of Oaxacan Youth (*Instituto de la Juventud Oaxaqueña-IJO*). These were some of the only spaces at the time where graffiteros could practice their art without fear of being arrested or beaten by police. Here they were also able to connect with other graffiteros beyond their own groups or colonias which was important for expanding networks that would later be mobilized during 2006 and also in later actions like the defense of urban space that occurred on February 15, 2011 described in the previous chapter. For example, Aler and Vain, two of the current members of Arte Jaguar, were invited to join the crew after other members began noticing their work at IJO sponsored graffiti competitions. Later, however, we will see the contradiction in having government-sponsored graffiti events manifest in 2006.

Below are images of AK Crew, Arte Jaguar and some of their work. One can see the characteristic mixing of punk and hip-hop influences with political commentary. For example, the punk references reoccur, with the Mohawk being a common attribute given to their subjects (Figure 63).



Figure 63: Punk stencil by Arte Jaguar. Photo Credit Susy Chávez Herrera

In the image of legendary Mexican film star and singer Pedro Infante, we also see the addition of a red star on the center of his black charro hat (Figure 64), which is a reference to the EZLN's black flag with a red star in the center (Figure 65), as well as the wheatpaste of their namesake Emiliano Zapata (Figure 66).



Figure 64: Pedro Infante with red star by Arte Jaguar. Photo Credit: Author



Figure 65: Zapatista flag. Photo credit:seven\_resist.



Figure 66: Arte Jaguar Zapata Wheatpaste. Photo credit: Arte Jaguar

And finally, the influence of U.S. hip-hop culture is apparent in the dress of the artists as they sport characteristically baggy loose-fitting clothes, plaid shirts and hoodies in the older photograph (Figure 67, below) and in the more recent photo (Figure 55, above) you see the artist, Serckas of AK Crew and VHS (Vandal Horror Skuad) Crew, with less baggy clothes but the shorts are still long, and the straight-billed baseball cap and sneakers are influenced by more recent hip-hop styles.



Figure 67: AK Crew circa 2002. Photo credit: AK Crew



Figure 68: Arte Jaguar Stencil circa 2005. Photo Credit: Arte Jaguar



Their styles have evolved and expanded over time, and members have come and gone, but Arte Jaguar and AK continue to inscribe their political and social commentary on walls throughout the city as they have for over a decade. For example, in the stencil from 2005 shown in Figure 68 (above), Arte Jaguar produced an image of two children with the message “*Algunos niños lo tienen todo mientras muchos mendigan un pan*” [Some children have it all while many beg for a piece of bread]. Smek remembers one of the first stencils he made upon forming Arte Jaguar which was an image of then-governor José Murat holding a gun. On March 18, 2004 Murat was in his final months in the governorship when he was the apparent victim of an assassination attempt (Castillo García 2004). In June of that year, however, the Federal Prosecutor’s Office (*Procuraduría General de la República*) concluded that Murat had staged the assassination attempt against himself, which Smek believed to be “a political strategy to get the PRI more votes” in the upcoming state elections. Days after learning of the news, Smek stenciled the image of Murat holding a gun on a wall along *Avenida Carranza* (Carranza Avenue) where the attempt had been staged.



Figure 69: Arte Jaguar adaptation of “Obrero en huelga asesinado” 2005. Photo credit: Arte Jaguar

Likewise in Figure 69 (above) shows a stenciled image of corpse with the message “*Nos han asesinado sin dar explicaciones...por tener conciencia de dignidad y justicia!! Esta es la verdad*” [They have murdered us without offering explanations...for having awareness of dignity and justice! This is the truth]. Along with the image of “el Juárez punk,” and the image of former Governor José Murat holding a gun (not shown) this was one of the first stencils that Smek made when he began experimenting with the technique in the early 2000s. It is his interpretation of a famous photograph by Mexican photographer Manuel Álvarez Bravo called *Obrero en huelga, asesinado* (Striking Worker, Assassinated). He describes the impact that the imagery in his art has provoked and context in which he came to create it:

For me the images we used were in the right place at the right time. For example, the one I did of Murat, or the Benito Juárez punk or the stencil I did of that

photograph of Manuel Álvarez Bravo called *Obrero en huelga asesinado*. I put it right in front to the Law School in the downtown and I really enjoyed the reaction it caused- I thought, “Damn, I made that!” It was cool, a lot of people like it since we used the wall and part of the sidewalk. And people didn’t even know it was us because they knew us as AK but they didn’t know who was in Arte Jaguar.

Maurice: And why did you create those particular images? What meaning did they have for you?

Smek: Well, there were events [like the staged assassination attempt by Murat], there are always events that in some way or another impact us and as a creator, as a graffitero, as a person from el pueblo, from the barrio, these events have consequences for you. And these consequences are manifested in one form or another, painting, writing, singing, etc. And all the things that you hear about and see in the news or when the banda tells you about what just happened, like “Damn did you hear what Murat did? He went too far!” Well than immediately you had to do something against this to denounce it.

It is clear from Smek’s artwork and his understanding of the social context surrounding its production and reception that his street art is a way for him to claim urban space, the streets, sidewalks and walls. Through his art he converts these public spaces into his “political terrain” where he engages other citizens and the government in dialogue about politics and current events like the perceived vote-getting strategy of the staged assassination attempt. Smek recalled that he made that stencil in part because:

[the government staged the act] so that people would say ‘Oh my poor governor they almost killed him’ and who knows what else. And lots of people believe it so

it so it's effective with, you know, he votes and elections and all that noise. So that image was cool because it did capture a lot of people's attention.

Through the creation and placement of images like the ones just described youth like Smek and the rest of Arte Jaguar and AK Crew are using political street art as a means of agitating and educating outside of dominant channels.

This use of political street art resonates with George Lipsitz' work on Chicano poster art which he claims was used during the Chicano movement to foster an oppositional public sphere (Lipsitz 2001). Lipsitz argues that the poster is an attractive form for social movements because of its ability deliver a "complex message in a compressed form" (2001:170). Edward McCaughan discusses the use of posters in the 1968 student movement in Mexico. According to McCaughan silkscreen serigraph poster production is economic, efficient, and can be produced by hand, characteristics that make it accessible and able to respond rapidly to a movement's changing needs. These same characteristics described by McCaughan and Lipsitz for movements in the 1960s could be said to apply to the stencil for movements today.

Around the same time Smeck was experimenting with stencils, Vain and fellow Arte Jaguar artist Aler began applying them throughout the streets of Oaxaca. They are both known for the quality and creativity of their stencils. In 2002, before the formation of Arte Jaguar, they formed a collective called Stencil Zone and worked mostly in their colonias along the Northwestern periphery of the city. Vain pointed specifically to the influence that punks had on his politically charged stencils:

Maurice: What first caught your attention about stencils?

Vain: The technique because it was not very common at the time [late 1990s]. Back then it was more about bombs and tags and that whole thing but there wasn't much work being done with stencils. I remember I saw one over here by [the church] Santo Domingo by a guy who went by the name of Afro and he did a stencil that was a Revolutionary scene and nothing else but it looked really cool because you just didn't see that here. The ones who would work with stencils though were the punks, the rockers, they were the ones who put stencils in the streets back then and that was it.

Maurice: What kind of stencils did the punks make then?

Vain: They did their anarchy letters, "October 2 is not forgotten," stuff like that but as stencils and it looked cool and that is what caught my attention man. And that is how I started working stencils.

Vain repeats a story I heard many times with youth in Oaxaca, which details the rich mixing of hip-hop and punk elements in Oaxaca through street art. Also it is important to note that the structure of street art crews- their relatively small size, fluid and overlapping memberships, and horizontality- mirrors that of youth political collectives. Since 2006 this has facilitated a great deal of collaboration between various crews and collectives. While seeing political street art, especially stencils, in Oaxaca has become common place since 2006, this was not always the case. When members of Arte Jaguar and AK began experimenting with this technique it was not always well received by their peers. They actually received a good deal of criticism from other graffiteros and artists for mixing their art and politics and for using stencils. Vain of Arte Jaguar and Stencil Zone explains:

Since long before 2006 we have been doing political stencils...I remember one time Smek told me that a guy that studied with him at the *Bellas Artes* wouldn't help him put up a stencil, it was that one of the photograph of Manuel Álvarez Bravo...the guy was worried about what people would say, he was scared that other banda would criticize him because they criticized stencils a lot back then. We have never cared about whether stenciling is graffiti or not. Why would I care if it is or it isn't? But a lot of people would say, "No that is not graffiti." They didn't like it at the time. If you would paint political stuff they would say, "No don't paint that. What will others say? You shouldn't mess with the government." I remember we made an Ulises Ruiz and put rats all around him. We did that because that was at the time that they cut down a tree over here in the zócalo. That was around 2004.<sup>54</sup> They cut down the tree so we started addressing that...but after 2006 now everyone wants to paint stencils. Now everyone does it, which on the one hand is cool but on the other hand I think it's messed up because it's the same banda that used to criticize and say "Nah fool that's not graffiti." But when 2006 started they also start doing it.

Before 2006 Arte Jaguar and AK Crew had to fight against norms in greater society that condemned their art as vandalism, but they also pushed back against norms within the graffiti community that questioned their art for both its form and content. What they did share with most graffiteros, however, was the same experiences of being harassed, beaten and arrested by police for practicing their illegal art forms. These common experienced

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<sup>54</sup> The event Vain is speaking of actually occurred in 2005.

and the great deal of collaboration and overlap between crews created networks that were mobilized in 2006 and have been strengthened and expanded since.

### ***Promoting and Policing Hip-Hop Through the Institute of Oaxacan Youth***

While street art crew like Arte Jaguar and AK were fighting for spaces where graffiteros could express political and social commentary, the punk movement was involved in organizing for the creation of spaces for punk culture through fanzines and the organization of independent punk concerts. And the nascent rap scene found a state government willing to organize concerts alongside their graffiti contests. They did so through the *Instituto de la Juventud Oaxaqueña* (Institute of Oaxacan Youth or IJO) whose mission statement reads in part, that it exists in order to:

Organize and lend support to Oaxacan youth...preparing them to be able to fully assume their responsibilities by participating in social processes as agents of change in justice and liberty...to establish, support and coordinate programs that assist the full development and free expression of youth (N.d.).

Keeping in line with their mission, the IJO held free rock and hip-hop concerts in conjunction with the graffiti contests it sponsored. At first IJO events consisted mostly of rock music and graffiti expos but eventually included rap music and breaking. The spaces opened by the IJO for hip-hop culture would become key sites of encounters for youth—the formation of crews was fostered by the interactions that took place at IJO events and yet other youth were introduced to hip-hop through these events. A benign reading of the institute's mission statement would conclude that the IJO opened these cultural spaces in order to nurture youth expression and citizenship. Some youth that I spoke with share this

reading of the IJO's mission but others have a much more critical interpretation. Mare for example, viewed the IJO as an attempt by the government to manipulate youth through a combination of cooptation, surveillance and censorship,

“there was a moment when the government used these forms of expression [graffiti and rap] to alienate youth.” Either way there were clearly unintended consequences of the IJO's patronage of hip-hop events, such as the fact that many of the crews whose formation was aided by the social space that the IJO provided, more than likely painted in the streets illegally.

Certainly, this relationship between the government, youth and hip-hop was full of tensions and contradictions. For example, another unintended consequence of the way the IJO operated was that youth began to fight for the creation of spaces that were independent of the state. Here Mare talks about her history of activism vis-à-vis hip-hop and the IJO:

Before [2006] we already had a struggle with the IJO and their taking over all of the spaces that held together the whole hip-hop scene here in Oaxaca...they created a monopoly on hip-hop in Oaxaca. All of a sudden that became our struggle, because this institute wouldn't allow you to do things independently. They would block independent projects and if you refused to perform at their events they blacklisted you. If your organized an event for a certain day, they would have an event the same day but theirs was either free of charge or they would bring in somebody from outside [of Oaxaca]. And it as always the same manipulation, the IJO would say “See those kids are only doing it for the money. See they aren't your banda because they are charging you a 20 peso cover



charge.” And we wouldn’t even break even by charging 20 pesos but it was very easy for them as a government institution to say “They are charging you when we give it to you for free.” But they had the budget, they are not doing you a favor, that’s their job, that’s why that organization was created. But there was a generation of graffiti here in Oaxaca that only worked with them because they were the ones with the money, they had the funds to pay for their spray-paint, to give out an award. And all of a sudden, there were no independent events. So that became our struggle, to find the means to begin to put on independent events, to create spaces.

The is talking about is the early 2000s and the local hip-hop was barely getting going and she was part of hip-hop collective that included 12 rappers and a DJ. They tried to organize hip-hop events independently of the IJO but they had a hard time coming up with the resources necessary or finding spaces for the events. They found support among sympathetic punks who had been struggling to find venues and come up with the resources to organize shows for years. Punk shows, however, were often held in vacant lots in colonias and not in the center, which made it more difficult to get a critical mass to events, especially for rappers who were trying to build an independent hip-hop scene whereas the punk scene was much more established at that point. The IJO, on the other hand had a prime event space, located near the baseball stadium in the city center. Mare explains:

You could say that that space was the most important one in Oaxaca, but in order to use it you had to get approved by the IJO...so we had the experience of having to try and find the way to do things independently. As rappers we were very

focused on creating spaces for rappers, to start bringing groups in from outside [of Oaxaca], do start searching for the resources to put on our own events. But we didn't have an education, we didn't even travel outside of Oaxaca and when we did eventually leave, we did so by our own means, with our own resources. So we struggled but we can feel very proud that we never depended on any of those organizations, they were never able to stop us.

Several other youth I spoke with reported many of the same concerns with the IJO, principle among them was that they sought to eliminate autonomous initiatives by fostering distrust among the community, they censored artistic content and required all youth who sought to use their space or attend their events to register their personal information including full names, phone numbers and home addresses. The gravest accusations against the IJO, however, came during 2006 when they are said to have turned over their registries to the police with the personal information and addresses of all the youth who participated in IJO events. It is said that IJO personnel signaled which youth were likely involved in the movement based on their perceived political leanings and sometimes just out of spite for youth they didn't like. Several graffiteros and rappers were either arrested by police or kidnapped by paramilitaries and tortured. One rapper who has close ties to VOCAL and CASOTA was arrested in the mass arrests that followed the disarticulation of the movement by the PFP in November of 2006. He was taken to the state prison located in the town of Santa María Ixcotel. Following his release from prison he fled the city and rarely comes back but when he does he is visibly nervous and paranoid. I asked a member of VOCAL about him and was told that his paranoia is the result of his arrest and subsequent torture at the hands of state police. They told me,

“He is one of the ones that regularly performed at their events, he let his guard down and gave them his information. That’s how they knew where to find him after 2006.” I asked Daniel of VOCAL about this type of repression and he told me, “I don’t like to personalize that aspect of things, the repression, but like everyone in the movement we have been touched by it.”

I asked a graffitero about the role of the IJO in the repression of youth in 2006 and afterwards. He said he was not personally attacked or arrested but then went on to state that he, those in his crew, and graffiteros in general had received frequent threats over the phone as well as having warrants issued for their arrest.<sup>55</sup>

El ‘fuser’ [a veteran graffitero] was in charge of the Institute of Youth, he organized all the graffiti, breaking and rap events, but later he became a *priista* [supporter or member of PRI party] because they threw him a bone [material rewards]. Then in 2006 he was the one who started signaling who we were [to the police]. Although those are only rumors. We don’t know 100% but what we do know is that either way he sold out to the government. What bothers me personally is that he is with the PRI and that he supported Ulises Ruiz. Actually after the government retook the zócalo I saw him there cleaning up. But I just acted like I didn’t see him so he wouldn’t notice me because that is when the cops were hunting us.

Maurice: Either way that’s messed up.

Graffitero: Damn right. What we did get personally was threats. They would call our cell phones but that was normal for all of the banda. And also the arrest

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<sup>55</sup> Information came via personal correspondence. I chose to anonymize due sensitive nature of data.

warrants. They issued them for all of us. “For anyone responsible for acts of vandalism.” And there they include graffiti, the commandeering of buses, the burning of buses, blocking public roadways, damage to private property and whole lot of other shit. Yeah it was messed up.

He was quick to mention that the only thing connecting the IJO to the repression of youth were rumors, but he was hard pressed to come up with any other explanation for how their names and personal information was released to the police and whoever was calling to threaten them over the phone. Moreover “el fuser’s” connection to Ulises Ruiz as a political supporter and head of the IJO does not help quell those rumors.

### ***2006: The Political and Artistic Opening***

As discussed in Chapter V, youth were integral to the horizontal spaces of the barricades, the Okupa and the radios. Graffitiros participated in these spaces in these spaces other ways, for example, by demarcating territories with banners or graffiti. Several graffitiros remembered being asked to produce banners (Figure 70), stencils, murals (Figure 71) or to otherwise intervene artistically in the new social spaces. Graffitiros also contributed to the movement through the production of banners for marches and announcing social movement events and news through stencils, posters and graffiti. Political scientist Lyman Chaffee (1993) documents similar efforts by activists in South America and the Iberian Peninsula to use political street art as a grassroots democratic form of mass communication that is both low technology and decentralized; hence making it accessible and well-suited for dynamic environments such as those surrounding social movements.



Figure 70: Ni un muerto mas (Not one more dead) by Arte Jaguar. Photo credit: Aler



Figure 71: Asesinos (Assassins; Depicted are Gov. Ulises Ruiz and Pres. Felipe Calderon) by Arte Jaguar. Photo credit: Arte Jaguar

Graffitiros' relationship with urban space and the built environment is such that the streets are their laboratories, training grounds, galleries and spaces for socializing and belonging. Since public space is often central to political struggle, I argue that a youth subculture that is largely centered around marginalized urban youth exercising their rights to public space can be especially important to the life and potential of any popular movement. T.V. Reed makes a similar claim in his book *The Art of Protest* (2005) where he recognizes that subcultures are often key recruitment sites for social movements.

This, in part, helps explain why so many street artists participated in the takeover and defense of public spaces during the 2006 social movement. Aside from the production of their art, the context provided by hip-hop culture greatly influences the way graffitiros envision their relationship to urban space. Here the work of hip-hop scholar Murray Forman is especially poignant. In his 2002 book, *The 'Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-hop*, Murray discusses the importance of space in hip-hop culture:

A highly detailed and consciously defined spatial awareness is one of the key factors distinguishing rap music and hip-hop from the many other cultural and subcultural youth formations currently vying for public attention. In hip-hop, space is a dominant concern, occupying a central role in the definition of value, meaning, and practice" (2002:3).

The very way the graffitiros I interviewed and conducted participant observation with speak about their art and activism is telling of the connection Murray makes between hip-hop culture and space. They repeatedly talk about the streets and the *barrio* or *colonia* in a way that shows that for them, *the barrio comes first*. When I asked artists where they

preferred to paint, in the colonias, in galleries or in the center of the city, they almost always responded that they thought it was important to work in the center because of the visibility and the symbolic importance of the city center but that they *preferred* to work in the colonias. There was no consensus on galleries however, with some criticizing entry into galleries as selling out and others seeing galleries as an opportunity to reach new audiences. Vain summed up his feelings as follows:

I like to work in the streets. You do work there and people appreciate it man. The whole barrio gets to see it without any restrictions. Also your work lasts not just for months but there are some pieces that have lasted for years and that is really cool. Here in the center it's cool too and exhibiting your work [in galleries] and all of that is cool, I mean you have to be open and not close yourself off. It's a good opportunity, but it's like you feel more comfortable in the streets. We are from colonias man and you feel that there is a great appreciation towards your work in the colonias. The barrio really values it and they come up to you and thank you and they actually like what you do. And when people pass by when you are painting and they like your work sometimes you even make a connection right there. They ask you to paint the schools or their cars and things like that. And you go you paint a wall, you paint the car and it's all good because you see new places and get to hang out with a lot of new people.



Figure 72: Vain painting a Frida mural. Photo credit: Arte Jaguar.





Figure 73: Mural by AK Crew. Photo credit: Serckas

I asked Serckas of AK Crew (Arte Kallejero) and VHS (Vandal Horror Skuad of Zaachila) if he preferred to have his work in the streets or in galleries. He responded that you have to respect that some people make a living exhibiting in galleries but that for him:

There is always more of a commitment with your work when you do it in the streets with the people.... the streets don't discriminate...the street doesn't tell you what kind of piece you can paint... The street is free... when all is said and done I think that you feel more confidence in the streets because that is where you come from and that is where everyone you know is and that is where all of your knowledge comes from. It's like giving back a piece of you to the street

I argue that this strong identification with the streets and investment of work in the streets fosters a very real sense of ownership of urban space in street artists such that when they felt that those streets were under attack in 2006 they rushed to defend them. Graffiteros' rush to help defend the streets of Oaxaca also occurs after years of confrontations with local police. In the process of perfecting their paint lines, youth became accustomed to being arrested and beaten by local police. This contentious relationship with the police laid the stage for the battles over the streets of Oaxaca in 2006 where youth often formed the front lines. One of the members of Arte Jaguar told me that helping repel police attacks in 2006 by throwing rocks and police officers' own gas canisters back at them was like getting revenge for all of the times they arrested and beat him up for painting in the streets. These kinds of antagonistic relationships with the state can have a profound impact on one's subjectivity and provide plenty of reason to help fight against the police in the context of a popular movement.

In addition to providing spaces for youth to contribute their art during movement actions and in movement spaces, 2006 also provided an opening for the creation of artistic spaces and the thickening of connections between different youth initiatives in the years that followed. Here is Mare explaining the impact that the social movement had on street art in Oaxaca:

2006 provided an important opening especially for graffiti, many spaces were opened. It gave a different direction to graffiti. It was viewed differently. It wasn't like before, that it was viewed as something for troublemakers and cholos. In 2006, it was the only medium of communication that really told you the truth. And that was the aspect of graffiti that was recognized, even afterwards when I

was invited to rap in galleries, in spaces where before they would never have even turned around to look at me. Even among the cultural elite of Oaxaca, all of a sudden, where before it was seen as being for the fucking lowlifes!

Much like Mentas Liberadas described punks finally feeling accepted by their elders after they helped provide security during 2006 and were allowed time on the radio, graffiteros and rappers found spaces of acceptance in mainstream institutions like art galleries and important cultural centers like the Oaxaca institute of Graphic Arts (IAGO). Serckas even joked with me when I asked him about his participation in 2006:

Maurice: Aside from your protest art in 2006, did you participate in any other way or in other spaces? Or was your participation more as an artist?

Serckas: Aside from that we had other ways of participating but at that time I still didn't consider myself an artist or any of that. I was just your run of the mill graffitero. At that time graffiti wasn't considered art! [laughs]

In addition to the validation that comes with being invited into dominant spaces, comes the risk of cooptation or worse like what some believe happened with the IJO in 2006. The turning over of the IJO registries and signaling of graffiteros for arrest and kidnapping has left many youth hesitant to work with government agencies, but the memory of that betrayal seems to be fading for those that weren't personally touched by it. The administration of the new governor, Gabino Cué, has increased the budget for cultural programs and regularly offers grants to artists, including street artists. How this relationship will play out and how long a culture-friendly administration will be in office remain to be seen.

Graffiteros have, however, opened their own spaces post-2006. The ASARO collective has opened various incarnations of their gallery and workshop called Espacio Zapata and Cer and Smek opened a collaborative art space in 2009 called Estación Cero. This space is located downtown and throughout it they have offered other artists and activists a space to converge, create, discuss and be seen and heard in the heart of the often inaccessible urban center of Oaxaca. There they offer workshops, show films, host live music and exhibit young artists' work. According to their blog Estación Cero is:

An independent cultural project that materializes out of the need for a space from which to disseminate the emergent, self-organized, community-based projects associated with the various Artistic Disciplines. As a part of our practice, we feel that it is crucial to validate work that has emerged from public space, creating: workshops, talks, video presentations and traveling exhibitions. In our space we offer materials for the practice of graffiti, as well as limited edition design objects, books, magazines, fanzines, among other things. In addition, there are two exhibition halls in which the work of national and international artists is displayed (Estación Cero 2011).

Nearly all of the interviews I conducted with graffiteros were held at Estación Cero and during my time there I saw countless primary school, middle school and high school students come by to participate in workshops, buy spray-paint or just come hang out and ask questions about street art. As a part of the network of counter-spaces elaborated in the previous chapter, Estación Cero has also served an important function as an organizing space for activists. During the defensive action of February 15, 2011 for example, I received a mass text message from a graffitero active in the space calling for people to

mobilize towards the zócalo. I later found out several graffiteros were able to respond immediately to the news of the repression because they were in a meeting at Estación Cero, which was located only a few blocks away. Moreover, Estación Cero has hosted activist events such as the “Hackmitin 2010,” which is organized by a national network of “hacktivists.” These events have been offered in several Mexican cities including Puebla and Mexico City and have counted with international participation. These events are free of charge to attend and bring together hackers and activists to attend presentations, round table discussions, and participate in workshops on issues such as freeware, hacking, internet security, etc. The idea comes from “Hackmeetings” held in Italy during the 1990s. In 2010 the national meeting was in Oaxaca with events being held in a series of public, cultural and activist spaces- including Estación Cero and CASOTA.



Figure 74: Hackmitin 2010. Photo credit: Estación Cero

In 2011 Cer and Smek opened a community space called El Pocito on an abandoned lot that belonged to their grandfather in Pueblo Nuevo. They opened this space in order to bring art into their colonia. I asked Cer what it was like opening El Pocito compared to Estación Cero. He told me that:

Having a space in the city center has been great. We were able to experiment and learn about what the art scene in Oaxaca and Mexico. But now with El Pocito we are working more in the barrio because that is where we are from and that is where there is a scarcity of art. That is what the space is for, to share art with the barrio, to share with our people and learn together. We learned a lot with Estación Cero and now it is time to put them in practice through community projects. To be honest the art world is full of prejudice, judgment, gatekeepers and institutional bullshit which is why we decided to pull back from that and focus on the barrio. Many of their projects at El Pocito are workshops geared at getting children involved in art and hosting events for youth. In 2010, Vain and Aler also formed a community-based art project called Corriente Alterna (Alternate Current). They travel to indigenous communities throughout the state and offer free drawing, painting, stencil-making, etching and Day of the Dead mask-making workshops. Aler described the project:

We offer the workshops for free and don't even charge for the materials. We do this without accepting any support from the Secretary of Culture or any other governmental organization.

Maurice: How to finance your trips and workshops?

Aler: Because of 2006 I met lots of banda, from teachers, people from the pueblos, municipal presidents and students. So based on those connections and friendships that have been strengthening and growing over time I was able to go to communities. With the passing of time since 2006 some of the people I met then are now municipal president or they are part of a neighborhood committee or some other social organization. Teachers have become directors and students have become teachers so when they learned of the project we were doing they were interested and invited us to their communities. We also gave mask-making workshops in my town of San Pedro Tidaá and have been to all of the 8 regions of the state.

Through Corriente Alterna and El Pocito graffiteros are taking advantage of the artistic opening offered by 2006 to strengthen their ties to their communities and expand their networks throughout the city and state.



Figure 75: Children learning to make Day of the Dead masks. Photo credit: Estación Cero



Figure 76: Silk-screening workshop. Photo credit: Estación Cero



Figure 77: Silk-screening workshop 2. Photo credit: Estación Cero



CASOTA has also been a space for youth cultural production. In fact, I originally met Mare after at a hip-hop event held at CASOTA in February of 2010. She was an emcee at the event, introducing and cheering on young rappers who belonged to various hip-hop crews in Oaxaca. They were all young men, in their teens and early twenties and their performances spanned the spectrum of Oaxacan hip-hop- some recited overtly political lyrics, making reference to the social movement of 2006 and the injustice that prevails in Oaxaca; others delivered fluid rhymes paying homage to the four elements of hip-hop, connecting the dancing of the b-boys and b-girls, the cutting and scratching of the DJs, the paint lines of the graffiter@s and the lyrical flows of the MCs; and yet others shouted aggressive egocentric battle raps at each other in a back and forth attempt at one-upmanship. Their skill level was equally varied- some of the rappers appeared to be new to the scene and still trying to find their rhythm and style while others belonged to established crews with a honed sound and style.

There were a dozen or so activists from CASOTA and VOCAL who were helping run the event and the crowd was an interesting mix of seventy to eighty young men and woman from various colonias throughout the city. They were younger on average than the activists, most appeared to be between 15-18 years old, whereas the activists were mostly in their mid to late twenties. Most sported hip-hop inspired clothing- baggy jeans, polyester workpants and shorts, long t-shirts, oversized polo shirts, name brand or bootlegged name brand foot apparel, backpacks, baseball caps or highly stylized hairdos and dark sunglasses. The DJ and I were definitely the oldest people there- he was introduced as *the* original DJ of the Oaxacan hip-hop scene.

After several performances, some of the rappers as well as people from the crowd began requesting that Mare rap. She deferred at first but ultimately obliged once the rappers that were performing handed her the microphone. She exchanged some words with the DJ, he began searching through his computer and soon was playing the track he was looking for. Mare bobbed her head and performed her microphone check “*Uno, dos. Uno, dos*” as the beat looped before launching into her first verse. Her style was aggressive at first and then relented a bit as she sang her own chorus. Her lyrics questioned traditional gender roles and challenged men and woman to accept woman as equals. In her song *Que Mujer* (What a woman) she rapped:

What a beautiful woman! But allow your courage to be greater /Don't let anyone step on you. Don't let anyone tell you what to do! /That the best of you is not hidden behind makeup. Stop believing that sexist garbage!

*[Qué belleza mujer! Pero que sea mas tu coraje/ No dejes que nadie te pise/ Qué no te manden/ Que lo mejor de ti, no lo oculte el maquillaje. Ya deja de tragarte la basura sexista!]*

Chorus: Woman don't limit yourself to being what they ask you to be...Don't allow others to control the decisions in your life

*[Coro: ¡Mujer no te limites a lo que te piden ser... No dejes que en tu vida otros quieran decidir!]*

Female liberation is what we yell, but who is liberated when you are still waiting for the leading man from soap operas (night in shining armor)...a woman raised her voice for equity/ what did you do?

*[¡Liberación Femenina!, gritamos, ¿quién se libera? si sigues esperando el galán de telenovela... una mujer alzó la voz por equidad, y ¿tú que hiciste?]*

Her next song was called *Cuantos Mas?* (How Many More?) which is an anthem of sorts for the social movement of 2006. Her lyrics denounced the unpunished murders of 26 people during the latter half of 2006. She only performed a couple of songs, but with them she stole the show. I was impressed with how much respect the younger rappers and those in the audience paid her. Mare clearly had her own kind of mobilizing power that reached many youth that would not otherwise come to a space like CASOTA.

Several invited graffiteros painted murals during the event, including Cer of Arte Jaguar and AK. During another hip-hop event at CASOTA Aler and Vain offered a free stencil workshop which attracted a dozen high school age kids. Several b-boys (breakers or breakdancers) also contributed their own art to the event that day. This event exemplifies the way youth collectives in Oaxaca are using culture to raise social and political awareness, challenge the spatial marginalization of working-class youth, and as an avenue for community and movement building. Through the hip-hop event they brought together dozens of youth in the city center, many of who were not politically active and were spatially isolated from each other and from the center of the city. CASOTA and VOCAL activists did not saturate their captive audience with political rhetoric but did extend invitations for youth to make the space their own and to participate in various workshops that were offered. This practice has been effective in helping the collectives recruit new members as well as establish alliances and working relationships with other collectives, organizations and communities. For example, several CASOTA activists were introduced to the collective in this way. La Bruja for example,

started getting involved with CASOTA after participating in an alternative media workshop they hosted. And an artist-activist named Retro began participating in the collective after being invited to use the silk-screening workshop.

### ***Conclusion***

Social movement cultural production can serve several important roles in the life of a movement, such as providing visibility, communicating movement messages and disseminating news- these functions are even more valuable and needed in authoritarian and militarized contexts. In the case of the Oaxacan social movement, cultural production has clearly served these functions. Additionally, I argue that engaging in cultural production can create the structural mechanisms for collective action while also helping foster politicized identities, discourses, and political cultures. Through the case of Oaxacan graffiteros I offered examples of how hip-hop culture has played a prominent role in informing youths' spatial sensibilities, which in turn informed their decisions to participate in the social movement of 2006. Youth cultural production has also served as a rich site for articulating movement networks beyond the "politicized," to reach, for example, barrio youth who are alienated by overtly political ideological rhetoric yet share many of the same experiences as activists.

## CHAPTER X

### COMMUNITIES IN MOVEMENT:<sup>56</sup> FINAL THOUGHTS ON YOUTH ACTIVISM AND THE OAXACAN SOCIAL MOVEMENT OF 2006

The social movement of 2006 dramatically exposed the discontent and anger that many Oaxacans felt about the corruption and authoritarianism that Governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz came to represent. The movement brought together an amazingly broad cross-section of Oaxaca society- urban youth, elderly city residents, union activists, street children, peasants from the countryside, professionals and urban poor. Oaxacans with decades of organizing experience and those that were previously “unorganized” came together to reclaim and defend urban spaces throughout the city- spaces that ranged from the zócalo, state and commercial radio stations and airwaves, key intersections and neighborhoods through the construction of barricades, and youth even took over an old police station where many had previously been detained. Through the physical control over these spaces and others, the social movement territorialized itself giving participants sites in which to experiment with novel social relations, political subjectivities and political cultures.

After the violent disarticulation of the social movement by the Federal Preventative Police (PFP) in November of 2006, youth remained politically active, translating their collective experiences of participation in the movement into the creation of autonomous activist spaces. These spaces included political collectives like VOCAL

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<sup>56</sup> Raul Zibechi (2012) argues that instead of speaking of social movements as discrete units with clear beginnings and ends, it may be more fruitful to speak of societies or communities in movement, thus signaling the continuity of struggle that given communities are engaged in.

and CASOTA, as well as cultural spaces like Estación Cero and El Pocito. Together these spaces form a network of counter-spaces where activists continue to experiment with the alternative political cultures that emerged through the social and physical production of movement spaces in 2006. As I argued in Chapter VII, the extent to which these more territorialized spaces articulate with those counter-spaces constituted through episodic reappropriation of public space through direct-actions like encampments, roadblocks and marches, goes a long way in determining how effectively movements are able to maintain the activism and energy that is created during peaks in social movement activity.

In Oaxaca thus far, youth and other allied sectors from the social movement of 2006 have been quite effective at creating such networks. How deep the transformations that result from these experiences become remains to be seen. The ability of youth to network across difference and space while extending the energy created in 2006 has been remarkable, but serious challenges remain. Government and paramilitary violence against activists continues.<sup>57</sup> At the time that I write these closing thoughts about youth activism in Oaxaca, the murders of Bety Cariño and Jyri Jakkola on April 27, 2010 remain unpunished three years later. David Venegas Reyes, the outspoken barricadero, founding member of VOCAL, and survivor of the paramilitary ambush, just served his first month in prison after being arrested for the seventh time since 2007. None of the previous six charges have held up in court and have ranged from gun possession to drug charges. His freedom after this most recent arrest, however, seems to be in greater jeopardy due to the fact that the current criminal charge, which many people including myself believe to be

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<sup>57</sup> A recent report by Peace Brigades International declared that in 2012 Oaxaca surpassed Chihuahua as the Mexican state with the most attacks against activists-including death threats, harassment, defamation, criminalization, physical violence and murder (Matías 2013).

fabricated, involves a victim who is pressing charges- a taxi driver who alleges David and another activist assaulted and robbed him. Moreover, the economic feasibility of working-class youth maintaining rented spaces downtown looks bleak. Both CASOTA and Estación Cero have recently closed due to high rents downtown.<sup>58</sup>

Cer and Smek have refocused their collective energies on growing El Pocito, while Vain and Aler are focusing their time on extending the reach of their traveling workshops through Corriente Alterna. They were recently invited by an organization that works with street kids in the North-Central Mexican state of Querétaro to give workshops to recovering drug-addicted youth. Serckas from AK Crew was recently invited to Tijuana to offer a calligraphy workshop as part of a hip-hop festival. Members of VOCAL and CASOTA have continued the projects associated with the Geopolitica research group and the Campaign for Dissemination and Mobilization in Defense of the Land and Territory in Oaxaca, Mexico. They have been especially active in supporting the organizing efforts of people in the Zapotec town of San José del Progreso who have been trying to expel the Canadian mining firm, Fortuna Silver Mines Incorporated, which began construction on a silver mine in their town in 2010. At least one activist has been murdered and the town has been left deeply divided.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, activists continue to support the community San Juan Copala, where the situation continues to be grave. Through these cultural and political collaborations youth continue to articulate their networks beyond Oaxaca City.

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<sup>58</sup> CASOTA members turned in the keys to their rented space in April of 2011 and Estación Cero closed its doors in February of 2013.

<sup>59</sup> See Campero-Arena (2013) and Proyecto Ambulante (2013) for more on the struggle against Fortuna Silver Mines Incorporated in San José del Progreso.

### *Space as Political (Counter) Power*

I have argued throughout this dissertation for the importance of physical and social space for social movements. The creation of networked counter-spaces was crucial in 2006 and continues to be a significant factor in allowing social movement activism and energy to continue to circulate in Oaxaca. Drawing on Lefebvre's notion of counter-spaces (1991), which I define as the spatial projects produced through the political imagination and practice of social movements, I demonstrated how the physical spaces occupied and otherwise transformed by the social movement of 2006 were key locations from which participants contested the state's control of the city by establishing their own grassroots institutions like movement radio stations and popular security forces. Equally important, I argue, were the social spaces created through the production of these counter-spaces. For example, the collective identities forged through the barricades continue to inform activists' subjectivities years after the physical space of the barricades was crushed by the PFP. Moreover, the significance of those physical spaces has not been erased, as the 2010 takeover of the Cinco Señores intersection, which housed a key barricade in 2006, demonstrated. By connecting the traditional organizing space of the zócalo with that of Cinco Señores, youth and allied groups continue the process of remapping the landscape of Oaxacan politics by adding key public spaces to the already rich cartography of resistance found in the city.

Bringing Escobar's understanding of meshworks (2008) to bear on the notion of counter-spaces might be a productive way to follow the circulation of organizing power within decentralized social movements. Here it is instructive to recall Foucault's notion



of power as dispersed and capillary. Conceptualizing movements like the Oaxacan social movement of 2006 as meshworks allows us to follow the various kinds of power structures that can coexist within a given movement and how various currents can simultaneously move in different and unplanned directions. Understanding how this organizing power circulates and is spatialized allows us to recognize that just as state power is not found exclusively in official state spaces like the state capitol building, counter-hegemonic power is decentralized and dispersed, as is the case of the Oaxacan zócalo, Cinco Señores and spaces like CASOTA. The Oaxacan social movement demonstrates how this organizing power is spatialized through the production, maintenance and networking of counter-spaces, thus illuminating how the production of both space and power are simultaneously physical and social.

The social space provided by the creation of CASOTA and VOCAL combined with the physical space provided by CASOTA and Estación Cero built on experiences of youth participation in 2006 through street art, defense against police and paramilitary attacks, and the production of spaces like the barricades, the Okupa and the radio stations taken over by women in 2006. These spaces of resistance in turn, drew from existing projects and collectives like Arte Jaguar, AK Crew, and the punk movement. While the various collectives remain active, they no longer have centrally located organizing spaces and have begun to disperse back to their colonias. The effect that the lack of spaces like CASOTA and Estación Cero has had was striking on a follow-up visit in March 2013. The youth collectives I worked with during my fieldwork in 2009-2011 no longer had the visible everyday presence in the city-center that they had during my fieldwork. While I have no doubt that activists will continue their work, I do question what an action like the

one that occurred during President Felipe Calderon's visit on February 15, 2011 would look like today. What will these collectives' ability to act quickly and coherently in response to changing events be like without central spaces from which to mobilize and retreat to? How will their collectives maintain their coherence given the diversity of their projects and the fragmented urban terrain they inhabit, which is currently void of accessible spaces in which youth from different parts of the city can come together, socialize and organize?

The political and social terrain remains fluid, however, and new spaces are emerging, such as Espacio Cultural el Hormiguero, which is the meeting space and library located near downtown that I mentioned briefly in Chapter VII. There is also a used bookstore and lending library located downtown which was opened by members of the libertarian collective CESOL, which grew out of the Okupa library project they initiated. El Pocito continues to grow and add new projects. As these spaces continue to change, what cannot be undone are the cultural and subjective impacts the social movement has had on the youth who helped create it and the way in which they now view and interact with the space around them.

### ***From Street Artists to Barricader@s***

American Studies scholar T.V. Reed identifies 10 primary functions that cultural forms play within movements (2005:299-300): encourage; empower; harmonize; inform internally; inform externally; enact movement goals; historicize; transform affect or tactics; critique movement ideology; and make room for pleasure. There is a great deal of overlap between these functions but together they help ensure that movements are able to

disseminate information about their struggle in accessible and even appealing ways, that they are able to bridge difference within the movement and outside of the movement, and that the movement remains self-reflective and fluid. There were aspects of all of these functions in Oaxacan street art during and after 2006. I argue that one of the more enduring functions, has been the ability of street art to “empower” those who produced it in the context of the social movement of 2006. The legitimization of their art by elders in their communities and within the broader social movement in 2006 has had a profound impact on youths. Moreover, they now have access to local, national and international spaces that were unthinkable before 2006, such as art galleries and museums. I remember the words of Serckas who joked, “[Before 2006] I didn’t consider myself an artist or any of that. I was just your run of the mill graffitero. At that time graffiti wasn’t considered art!”

Additionally, I argue that engaging in cultural production helped create the structural mechanisms for collective action through networks of street art crews and the spaces they inhabited and worked previous to the emergence of the social movement. I offered several examples of how hip-hop culture has played a prominent role in informing youths’ spatial sensibilities, which in turn informed their decisions to participate in the social movement of 2006. For example, graffiteros’ relationship to the streets of Oaxaca and the illegality of their use of said streets led to the development of antagonistic relationships with police. Having already had the experience of confrontations with police over their cultural practice, graffiteros were that much more willing and able to defend the streets of Oaxaca in 2006.

Hip-hop and punk cultures have been especially effective in articulating movement networks to a large number of youth- both urban and rural. Through cultural spaces like Estación Cero, El Pocito and CASOTA, youth have used hip-hop culture to articulate movement networks beyond the “politicized.” For example, sponsoring a hip-hop event at CASOTA to reach barrio youth for whom overtly political rhetoric may not resonate but who share many of the same experiences as activists. Mare in particular, has been able to bring together very diverse groups of youth through her music, her activism and her promotion of independent hip-hop events in Oaxaca. In doing so she offers another model for what activism can look like that complements those represented by her fellow activists. Considering the important role that street art has played vis-à-vis contemporary youth activism in Oaxaca, efforts to reach diverse youth through hip-hop culture is an important aspect of current activist projects. Additionally, Oaxacan youth have garnered international visibility through artistic collaborations and exhibits, as well as through activist solidarity networks. These connections could also prove important in mobilizing support in the future.

### ***Oaxacan Youth and Global Social Movements***

The case of youth participation in the 2006 social movement in Oaxaca bears many similarities to other instances of youth participation in social movements- both contemporary and historical, such as the recent protests in the Middle East and the 1968 student movement in Mexico. Following the youth networks that came together in 2006 through time, albeit a relatively short period covering roughly the time period from 2005-

2011,<sup>60</sup> has implications for our understanding of the possible impacts that youth activists involved in other contemporary movements may have. By understanding how social movement energy and power circulates after the moments of peak mobilization, the case of youth collectives in post-2006 Oaxaca is especially significant in terms of how we think about social movement temporality and continuity.

Many of the tactics used by youth in Oaxaca are shared by youth involved in other global social movements including their reliance on direct-action tactics such as occupations of public space, sit-ins and marches, as well as their creative use of digital media technologies. The occupation of public space, whether it be for hours or weeks, has been central to movements like the #Occupy movements, Tunisia's Dignity Revolution, the Egyptian Revolution of 2011, #YoSoy132<sup>61</sup>, and Undocumented Youth movements in the U.S. Among activists in the Undocumented Youth movements, for example, the claiming of public space has become a key practice and emotive metaphor for "coming out of the shadows." A powerful aspect of "coming out" is the way activists challenge the invisibility and criminalization of undocumented immigrants by providing their personal testimonies in highly public and policed spaces like state capitol buildings or on public land near immigrant detention centers. In the case of the Egyptian Revolution of 2011, the mass occupation of Tahrir Square captured the global public's

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<sup>60</sup> I bracket the years 2005-2011 because those are the years that I studied most in-depth but they are by no means fixed.

<sup>61</sup> A mostly student movement that emerged during the elections campaigns leading up to the presidential election of 2012 in Mexico. The movement began in Mexico City with university students protesting the visit to their campus of the PRI candidate and now president Enrique Peña Nieto. Specifically, they were protesting the biased coverage of the commercial media in favor of Peña Nieto. See Tajobar 2012 for the connection between the media and Peña Nieto.

attention and proved to be the epicenter of a diverse movement that ultimately forced President Hosni Mubarak out of office. The case of urban youth activism in Oaxaca helps illuminate the ways in which social movements use and reconfigure space, which I argue offers a window into how power and counter-power are enacted, contested and negotiated.

The relationship between the use of social media technology and public space by activists is another important area of study. Scholarship in this area could provide useful insights to the case study presented here. Anthropologist Jeffrey Juris has researched the use of social media technology by activists within the #Occupy Everywhere movements and compared it to the use of “listservs, websites, and collaborative networking tools” within the movements for global justice of the 1990s-2000s. Juris argues that the former represent of a logic of aggregation whereby masses of individuals gather in physical space; whereas the later fostered a networking logic which he defines as being a cultural framework based on horizontal organization, relations and practices among autonomous groups and movements (2012:260). He concludes that the challenge for the #Occupy Everywhere movements lies in the extent to which they are able to combine and embed their logic of aggregation with a more decentralized and horizontally networked logic whereby they can maintain their energy and activism beyond the temporary and sporadic occupation of public space. This conclusion is very much in line with the arguments I set forth here and it will be interesting to see if #Occupy activists are indeed able to “embed” their logic with a more networked one.

There is no doubt that social media has played a key role in recent mobilizations across the globe, but the extent to which we can embrace ideas about them being “Twitter

or Facebook Revolutions” as is often proclaimed in popular media accounts is unclear.<sup>62</sup>

What is clear is that the use of social media in the social movements that have spread across the Middle East since 2011 has allowed youth to participate in novel ways. Digital media technologies have also greatly aided the spread of information regarding the movements. Clearly the use of social media and digital media technologies in social movement organizing is an important aspect of contemporary activism, especially among youth, and is a rich site for further scholarly study.

### ***Contemporary Activism and Spillover***

In 1968 Mexico hosted the Summer Olympics and used a white dove as a mascot for the games. The mascot was dubbed *La Paloma de la Paz* (the dove of peace).

Following the Tlatelolco Massacre where protesting students were brutally murdered 10 days before the opening ceremonies of the Olympic games, student artists developed a mascot of their own, a white dove with a knife stabbed into its midsection (Figure 78).

This image has become one of the emblematic symbols of the 1968 student movement in Mexico and of the Tlatelolco Massacre.

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<sup>62</sup> See articles by Beaumont (2011) and Cottle (2011) for more on whether or not Arab Spring movements should be deemed “Twitter or Facebook Revolutions.” See blog post by Zaynep Tufekci (2011) for more on the “new media ecology” vis-à-vis the Arab Spring. See blog post by Susannah Vila (2011) for limits of Twitter and Facebook based on her research with participants in the Egyptian Revolution



Figure 78: "2 de octubre, 1968 Tragedia." Photo credit: Revista Proceso. Fast forward to Oaxaca 2006 and again we see the deployment of the white dove appearing in Mexican protest art (Figure 79). Mexican artist and scholar Arnulfo Aquino Casa notes the continuity in Mexican protest art:

During Mexico 68 the dove was used to promote the ‘Olympics of peace’; unfortunately the dove was stained with the Mexican government’s brutal repression. During ‘Oaxaca 2006,’ the dove is stained again: the street artists smashed and stained it to demonstrate to the world, the impossibility of peace with the authoritarian governments of the ‘democratic’ Mexico of the XXI century” (2011:23).



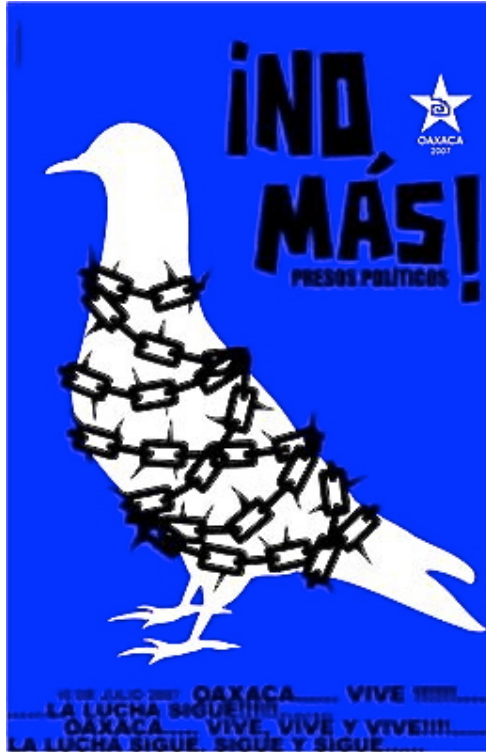


Figure 79: "No mas presos politicos" or "No more political prisoners." Poster Oaxaca 2007, artist unknown. Photo credit: Author

Appreciating the continuity of images deployed by youth artist-activists in Mexico offers a powerful entry point for considering continuities in social movement activism. The student movement of 1968 remains *the* reference point for youth activism in Mexico. Social movement art was an important vehicle for youth expression and dissemination of news during the 1968 movement as it was in 2006. Moreover, the movements share the occupation of public space and eventual government repression to retake that space. Asides from these and other similarities, the movements are also significantly different. While students were important participants in 2006, the movement was not defined by any one sector, and many of the youth activists were not university students.

An important continuity, however, is the participation of adults in 2006 who were students involved in the 1968 student movement- like La Bruja's father, for example. He

was active in 1968 as a student and in 2006 as a teacher, but the impact his activism has made does not end there. His participation in 1968 and subsequent movements were clearly a reference point for La Bruja's own activism four decades later. Several activists mentioned their parents' participation in the student movement of 1968 or other activism like being part of the teachers' struggle to democratize their union during the 1970s-80s. Meyer and Wittier's notion of social movement spillover- how the ideas, tactics, and participants from one movement impact another- is useful for thinking about this kind of relationship between movements (1994:277). Understanding how activists have and have not learned from the experiences of previous movements has implications for how we think about the impact of previous movements and the possibilities for future movements. The idea of spillover also frees us to consider the impact that the Zapatistas have had on Oaxacan youth as part of their "impact" as a social movement. The Other Campaign has had a significant impact on youth political projects and imaginaries in Oaxaca. One example of this was found in the Caravana del Jaguar launched by CASOTA, CACITA and VOCAL, which activists explicitly credited The Other Campaign with inspiring.

Just as the impact of the Zapatistas and the student movement of 1968 extend beyond the time and space in which the particular movements were rooted, I argue that the impact of the social movement of 2006 permeates Oaxacan society to the extent that new relationships, physical and social spaces, understandings of politics and political practices have been forged out of the collective experiences of activism, which will in turn almost certainly impact future movements. Gauging movement success and failure through the narrow parameters of their impact on state institutions ignores these impacts and continuities. Silvia of CASOTA and VOCAL captures this continuity beautifully in

her 2010 response to how long she planned on living at CASOTA:

However long the project lasts. It's a rented house but we can't just think about what we can touch, about the material. Instead we have to think about what it is that has been achieved...for example, the barricades are no longer in the streets but the barricades weren't just the physical space. They are [also] the deep transformation that they produced, the social relations, the everyday interactions. These things will be in my heart, whether I am here in the house, or in another space that spirit doesn't die. It's alive. I mean that, truly alive.

Even though the barricades and social movement spaces that have opened post-2006 have important material functions, Silvia highlights the cultural and social importance that they have left on the people that produced those spaces. In doing so she captures quite eloquently that which social movement scholars have difficulty capturing- the impacts that social movements can have on the subjectivities of local actors and everyday social changes, which I argue can be made visible if we focus on the physical and social constitution of space as a window into the multiple ways that power and counter-power are enacted, contested and negotiated. Doing so helps illuminate how the social movement of 2006 has impacted countless Oaxacans and the sociopolitical terrain they inhabit in ways that cannot be erased.

## APPENDIX A

### LIST OF ACRONYMS

- AK Crew, sometimes called AK 47 Crew- Arte Kallejero Crew
- APCO- Popular Neighborhood Assembly of Oaxaca
- APPO- Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca
- ASARO- The Revolutionary Assembly of Artists of Oaxaca
- BARL- Autonomous Block of Libertarian Resistance
- CACITA- Autonomous Center for the Intercultural Creation of Appropriated Technologies
- CACTUS- Center for Community Support Working Together
- CASOTA- Autonomous Oaxacan Solidarity House for Self-Managed Work
- CESOL- Libertarian Social Center
- CIPO- Popular Indigenous Council of Oaxaca
- CNTE- National Education Workers Coordinating Committee
- COCEI- Worker Peasant Student Coalition of the Isthmus
- COCEO- Worker Peasant Student Coalition of Oaxaca
- CODEP- Council for the Defense of the Rights of the Pueblo
- CU- Ciudad Universitaria (the UABJO campus located in Oaxaca City)
- EDUCA- Services for an Alternative Education
- EZLN- Zapatista Army of National Liberation
- FALP- Broad Front of Popular Struggle
- FMIN- National Independent Teachers' Front

FPR- Popular Revolutionary Front

IJO- Institute of the Oaxacan Youth

MRM- Revolutionary Teachers Movement

NAFTA- North American Free Trade Agreement

OIR- Intercultural Occupation in Resistance

PAN- National Action Party

PFP- Federal Preventative Police

PRD- Party of Democratic Revolution

PRI- Institutional Revolutionary Party

SEP- Secretary of Education

SNTIMSS- National Union of Workers of the Mexican Institute of Social Security

SNTE- National Education Workers' Union

UABJO- Autonomous University of Oaxaca “Benito Juárez”

UNITIERRA- University of the Land

URO- Governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz

UTE- Union of Education Workers

VOCAL- Oaxacan Voices Constructing Autonomy and Liberty

## APPENDIX B

### OIR OKUPA MANIFESTO (2006) AUTHOR'S TRANSLATION

To the committed and honest pueblo of Oaxaca, Mexico and the World

To the rural and urban workers

To the social, civil and nongovernmental organizations and unions

To those who honestly constitute the Popular Assembly of the People of Oaxaca (APPO)<sup>63</sup>

To the Kolectivos [collectives] and autonomous and libertarian groups

To la Otra Campaña and all those who resist and struggle for a better world

#### **From Rebel Oaxaca:**

Compañeras y compañeros, today we address you in these times of growing and accelerated revindication of our rights, of just and dignified struggle that we have known how to defend as a pueblo and that history will recognize. Today we admire and value all of the work and responsibility with which el pueblo of Oaxaca has acted and which sets an example for us. This is why we ask for your support, that you listen, offer your thoughts, so that together we learn to listen to each other.

The majority of us are youth, all utopians and with great hopes, we are one more that resists. Some of us find ourselves in one of so many sectors such as Students, Unemployed, Workers, Artisans, others dedicate our energies more to social activism and others of us are a bit of everything.

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<sup>63</sup> This manifesto was issued before the APPO decided to change Pueblo to Pueblos

We don't accept the future imposed on us, condemned to servitude or unemployment. Nevertheless, we believe that another society is possible only if we build it now.

We Love Fraternity, Peace, Liberty, Autonomy, and Solidarity, We are autonomous and libertarian and for that reason we do not depend on, nor do we trust, any Political Party, which ever it may be.

In the face of the increasing manipulation of the Mexican people at the hands of people who sellout for money and social prestige. We want to declare that we are Free. We won't sell ourselves. We defend our principles with organized actions, after all that's all we have.

We don't have to ask governments for anything, we don't believe in them, nor do we need them and the current situation confirms this to us. El pueblo with its great capacity to organize, to act and to resist has demonstrated to us that the stance of taking spaces that have never belonged to el pueblo, and even more just, to defend them. For example, the media OKUPADOS [occupied] by the women and pueblo of Oaxaca.

*OKUPAR* [To occupy]: Is a way of being and thinking about things and of disagreeing with the system, denouncing the abuses of power and proposing an alternative in the face of that which you do not agree with, OKUPAR is to say NO to capitalism, which excludes those who do not dance to its tune. We don't want to work to live, we want to live for self-empowerment, we don't want to mortgage our entire lives in order say this is mine. OKUPAR is to say no to authorities, no to hierarchies, it's to say you have worth because of what you are and not because of what you own. OKUPAR is

to desire and love the struggle for free spaces where we can grow, fulfill ourselves and create.

OKUPAR, is a practical alternative way of life in the present.

For all of the above reasons, we have decided to OKUPAR AN ABANDONED BUILDING and give it life.

The space we speak of is an abandoned building that for many years served as the municipal police station. Arrested in the streets, in raids on music concerts, only because of our manner of dress, for our age and for our rebelliousness, many of us were arrested and beaten by the Municipal Police who were stationed here in this space.

After the station was relocated...this space was used to buy and sell *priista* youth. Through workshops, and economic resources and materials supplied by the PRI, this space was occupied in order to train poor youth who lack opportunities, to be at the service of the state Government, to learn a trade, but most importantly to condition their consciousness. A few months ago they transferred those youth somewhere else.

The building is now unoccupied and in very bad condition. We ask those of you who are reading this document and are listening: Is it just to transform the centers of torture, repression and manipulation, into centers of social interest, of solidarity and justice?

We know of the repression and possible evictions, but today and tomorrow we are prepared to responsibly confront all that is to come.

In this space we seek to develop our skills, knowledge and potential through creativity, mutual aid, fraternity, self-organization [autogestión] autonomy, and solidarity. Our proposal for this space is:



The creation of a popular library in resistance, popular and educational cinema, exhibition and distribution of crafts made by political prisoners, a space for solidarity and cultural diffusion between pueblos, painting classes for kids, artistic and musical expression, housing for students that come from outside the city and don't have the means to pay rent, popular kitchen for those in need, donation center for clothing for street kids, lodging for homeless kids and adults, as well as for migrants that suffer along the path to the American dream.

There will also be talks, workshops and study groups about: violence against woman, political prisoners, social movements, alternative education, alternative media, repression, as well as learning how to create independent radio and print media.

We are also considering the possibility of offering workshops for learning trades such as carpentry, craftworks, welding, electricity, plumbing, sewing, urban farming, cooking and more.

We ask all of el pueblo and those who receive this Information: Do you think that it is just and possible to pay rent for a space that spreads culture and works solidarity and mutual aid between los pueblos? Would you be willing to support and defend the liberty and creation of these spaces that we hope to make a reality today?

In this regard, today us youth in resistance, make a request for solidarity, to join forces and support in order to appropriate, liberate and create spaces. Making out of them areas of self-empowerment, mutual aid, solidarity, tequio, alternative education, artistic, cultural, and countercultural creation and where we will carry out direct democracy as a means of autonomous organization that serves the common good.

WE CALL ON el pueblo of Oaxaca to disobey the injustice of private property, of profit and okupar abandoned spaces as your basic needs dictate and participate directly in the space OIR (Intercultural Occupation in Resistance), make it yours with your work, creativity and solidarity

(Bring brooms, trash bags, light bulbs, lamps, paint, soap, plants, plates, water, cups, supplies, chairs, tables you are not using...)

STOP THE VIOLENCE AGAINST THE PUEBLO OF OAXACA, ALL OF THE AUTHORITIES (PRI-PAN-PRD) THAT MADE UP THE OAXACAN GOVERNMENT MUST LEAVE. RETURN OUR DISAPPEARED, JUSTICE FOR OUR DEAD AND FREE OUR PRISONERS

OIR: Ocupación Intercultural en Resistencia

“PEACE, FRATERNITY, LIBERTY, AUTONOMY, SELF-MANAGEMENT [AUTOGESTION] AND SOLIDARITY.”

## APPENDIX C

### VOCAL MANIFESTO (2007) AUTHOR'S TRANSLATION

Those of us who currently make up this space are autonomous individu@s [individuals], libertarian collectives, self-organized spaces, antiauthoritarian people, Magonista organizations, Zapatista collectives, anarchist groups, barricaderos and barricaderas, and members of the APPO and algun@s [some] members of La Otra Campaña. Tod@s [All] are activists from the current social movement in Oaxaca.

This space is created as a means of bringing together the autonomous efforts of the mobilized pueblo of Oaxaca, those of us that actively participate in the social movement, both as a part of and apart from organizing structures such as the popular assembly of the peoples of Oaxaca (APPO) and those of us who find it important to keep our social movement faithful to its principles, autonomous and independent of political parties and reclaiming the assembly form as the most just and harmonious means by which to come to understand ourselves, to self-organize and to self-govern, where the people's accords are not based on the competition of majorities against minorities, nor in other forms of imposition commonly exerted by those in power, but rather, in a relationship of mutual respect among all parts of el pueblo (Vocal 2007b).

In this space we struggle for the construction, strengthening, and connection of diverse autonomies, being that we consider the autonomy of the pueblos, groups, collectives, individuals, organizations and others, to be a true alternative challenge to the current authoritarian system of government. Autonomy, as a process of building alternative realities, shows that there are other ways of changing things from the root,

where the pueblos decide their own forms and ways of life and not from the institutions of power that merely reform the oppressive and repressive spaces, such as political parties that produce *tiran@s* [tyrants], caciques and authoritarianism in the people that assume them through positions of power. It is for this reason that the work of this space is not confined to the electoral calendar, since with or without elections, autonomy advances through the organization and creation of proposals for an alternative society.

At the present moment of the movement, with a pending electoral process that has been presented to us as a possibility for the victory of our struggle, we believe it is necessary to stand with the girls, boys, women, men, pueblos, and regions of our state who participated and got involved in this great movement precisely because of its independence and autonomy in relation to political parties, to endorse those that like us share the thought that this situation is circumstantial and that we will come out ahead of this electoral process strengthened and more mature ready to face the beastliness of the government of power that serves the interest of those that own the money and like Ulises Ruiz Ortiz and Felipe Calderón, among others, are the original cause of the misery of our people.

The February 10 and 11 APPO State Assembly determined that the APPO as a movement would not participate in this electoral process, a decision that respects the principles of the APPO in that it would not be a political party, it was agreed that individual organizations can choose to participate within the framework of their autonomy but it was agreed that no candidate can use either the name or the relationship of their organization with the APPO for their campaigns and that those members of the advisory council that participate in the electoral process must leave their post with

irrevocable character the moment their candidacy is accepted by a political party, participation by the APPO is strictly to summon a protest vote against the candidates and allies put forth by Ulises Ruiz.

We note that both within and outside of the APPO movement, the mobilized people share the need to preserve our movement independent and autonomous of political parties, and that the history of our country has shown at different moments and in different circumstances that all political parties have suppressed and attacked the legitimate interests of the people, the APPO, within its agreements determined that it does not believe that political parties will respond to the needs of the people and endorsed the stance that the struggle of the people of Oaxaca goes beyond any electoral process.

We, the pueblos of Oaxaca, know the importance of mobilization and organization as the principle means for achieving victory, for this reason, we believe that it is necessary to continue to mobilize across the entire state, coming together, joining the different ways of understanding society and resistance. Because of its diverse and plural nature, this space [VOCAL] is the call to inspire this struggle.

The brotherhood between girls, boys, women, men and el pueblo in general, is not achieved in the moment of the march or in a rally where the differentiation between those that always speak and others that only listen necessarily takes place. This connection [brotherhood] should take place in the colonias, schools, pueblos, communities, regions, with discussion and action, and it is up to the mobilized pueblo to begin this discussion.

We want what at this moment, for the governments and criminal bosses and exploiters is the worst crime, we want justice, dignity, not to be afraid of expressing our ideas, to not be *discriminad@s* [discriminated] against because of our color, thought,

language, tastes...we want to use our creativity for the common good, we want the freedom of our political prisoners. We want the freedom to choose our way of life and not to have lies, violence and their forms of government imposed on us. We know that what we desire is correct and just.

We seek to unite in this struggle from below, with all of the men and women in the city and in the different regions who have offered resistance to those that control power and money. We seek to unite our experiences of struggle to the furthest corners of our state, we are looking to talk and exchange ideas with the men and women of Oaxaca.

L@s Afromexican@s [AfroMexicans], Zapotec@s, Mixtec@s, Huaves, Triquis, Chatin@s, Chontales, Mixes, Mazatec@s, Chinantec@s, Cuicatec@s, Ixcatec@s, Choch@s, Nahuas, Amuzgos, Zoques, Tacuates, as well as colonos [neighborhood residents], barricader@s, boys, girls, teachers, workers, peasants, migrants, immigrants, young people, students, homosexuals, bisexuals, and lesbians. Everyone who is fighting for a better world.

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