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Confronting Dispossession: Indigenous Mobilization for Environmental Justice, Ethnic Politics, and Gender Relations in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec

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Confronting Dispossession: Indigenous Mobilization for Environmental Justice, Ethnic Politics, and Gender Relations in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Sociology

by

Alessandro M. Morosin

June 2019

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This long project could not have been completed without the generosity and insight of countless people who helped me along the way. First and foremost, I would like to thank my family for believing in me.

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study of global feminism(s), global indigenism, and the history of core-periphery relations in the Istmo.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Confronting Dispossession: Indigenous Mobilization for Environmental Justice, Ethnic Politics, and Gender Relations in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec

by

Alessandro M. Morosin

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Sociology
University of California, Riverside, June 2019
Dr. Ellen Reese, Chair

This dissertation provides a case study of how rural and indigenous social movements in the Mexican state of Oaxaca launch contentious claims to defend their territories from mining and other resource extraction projects associated with global capitalism. Utilizing participant observation, ethnographic field work, and in-depth interviews with 53 community members across the Isthmus of Tehuantepec region (El Istmo), I examine how indigenous cultures and local political traditions are expressed in the regional mobilization against the Isthmus Special Economic Zone.

The first empirical chapter centers on understanding what motivates collective action in defense of territory, despite risks of repression. It finds that activists' strategies and discourses build upon pre-existing oppositional cultures. I discuss how comunalidad and Guendaliza’a—ways of life based on mutual aid and territorial sovereignty—have influenced a broad-based movement to prevent communal lands from being leased to open-pit mines. In this way, contra Swidler (1986), “unsettled social periods” can lead to cultural continuity and cultural revindication for suppressed cultures within a society, depending on the role of social movements embedded in these communities.
Next, I show how resistance movements reinforce as well as critique gender relations in the Tehuantepec Isthmus. Gender roles in El Istmo’s history of popular resistance have been underexplored. This chapter highlights the voices of younger indigenous feminists in the larger movement against neoliberalism in the Isthmus. Drawing from a sample of eight interviews, I show that men tend to extol women’s equality and women’s participation in the movement as an accomplished fact, while female activists encounter multiple forms of violence in daily life and even in certain movement spaces. In spite of the Istmo’s notoriety for being a female-centered, matrilineal culture, I treat the notion of Zapotec “matriarchy” as its own inequality regime (Acker 2006) that makes it taboo to struggle against patriarchal practices. This points to how people’s differential and overlapping social locations can generate tension over movement strategies and over shared cultural meanings.

Finally, this dissertation extends existing sociological research on natural disasters. I identify government policies of neglect, dispossession, and pacification in the wake of an 8.5 earthquake that struck the Isthmus in September of 2017. By reviving their culture of Guendaliza’á (mutual aid), grassroots movements worked to save their homes from demolition by private contractors, thus resisting cultural dispossession.

As global capital continues re-shaping patterns of land ownership, space, ecology and culture, rural/indigenous people’s interpretations and responses to structural threats are shaped by their own cultural context, as well by as their social positions within local, regional, national and global structures of domination.
RESUMEN DE LA TESIS

Enfrentando el Despojo: Movilización Indígena para la Justicia Socioambiental, la Etnopolítica, y las Relaciones de Género en el Istmo de Tehuantepec

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Doctor de Filosofía, Programa Postgrado en la Sociología
Universidad de California-Riverside, junio 2019
Dr. Ellen Reese, Directora

Esta tesis provee un estudio de caso sobre cómo los movimientos sociales rurales e indígenas en el estado mexicano de Oaxaca lanzan reivindicaciones para defender sus territorios de la minería y otros proyectos extractivos asociados con el capitalismo global. Utilizando la observación participante, trabajo de campo etnográfico, y entrevistas detalladas con 53 miembros de comunidades en la región del Istmo de Tehuantepec, investigo cómo las culturas indígenas y tradiciones políticas locales se expresan en la movilización regional en contra de la Zona Económica Especial del Istmo.

El primer capítulo empírico busca entender qué motiva a la acción colectiva en defensa del territorio, a pesar del riesgo de la represión. Encuentra que las estrategias y los discursos de los activistas se basan en culturas oposicionales preexistentes. Discuto como la comunalidad y el Guendaliza’a—modos de vida basados en la ayuda mutua y la soberanía territorial—han influido a un movimiento amplio para prevenir que las tierras comunales se alquilen a las minas a cielo abierto. De esta manera, contra Swidler (1986), los “periodos sociales inestables” pueden llevar a la continuidad cultural y la reivindicación cultural de grupos marginados dentro de una sociedad, en función del papel de los movimientos sociales integrados en tales comunidades.

Luego, demuestro cómo los movimientos de resistencia tanto reafirman como critican a las relaciones de género en el Istmo de Tehuantepec. Los papeles de género en
la historia de la resistencia popular en el Istmo han sido poco estudiados. Este capítulo resalta las voces de las feministas indígenas más jóvenes dentro del movimiento amplio contra el neoliberalismo en el Istmo. Recurriendo a una muestra de ocho entrevistas, demuestro que los hombres tienden a alabar la igualdad de las mujeres y su participación en el movimiento como hecho consumado, mientras que las activistas femeninas encuentran múltiples formas de violencia en la vida cotidiana y aun en ciertos espacios activistas. A pesar de la notoriedad del Istmo por gozar de una cultura matrilineal y centrada en las mujeres, entiendo al concepto del “matriarcado” zapoteco como un “régimen de desigualdad” en sí (Acker 2006) que da lugar a un tabú en torno a la lucha contra las prácticas patriarcales. Lo que apunta hacia cómo las posiciones sociales diferenciales y superpuestas pueden generar tensiones con respecto a las estrategias de los movimientos y los significados culturales compartidos.

Finalmente, esta tesis extiende el corpus existente de investigaciones sociológicas sobre los desastres naturales. Identifico a políticas gubernamentales de abandono, despojo, y pacificación tras un terremoto grado 8.5 que sacudió al Istmo en septiembre de 2017. Al recuperar su cultura de Guendaliza’a, los movimientos de base trabajaban para proteger las tierras comunales de la privatización y salvar sus hogares tradicionales de la demolición por contratistas privadas. Mientras que el capital global continúa reorganizando patrones de la propiedad de tierra, el espacio, la ecología, y la cultura, las interpretaciones y respuestas de pueblos indígenas y rurales a amenazas estructurales se forman por su propio contexto cultural, así como sus posiciones dentro de estructuras de dominación locales, regionales, nacionales y globales.
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PREFACE

One day in 2006, I was marching down a narrow street in a heavily Oaxacan neighborhood in Los Angeles, near 11th and Vermont. Crowds of demonstrators chanted *Presos políticos, libertad!* (Freedom for political prisoners!) to show support for a broad political rebellion that had begun with a teacher’s strike in Oaxaca’s capital city. Barricades were erected throughout the city of Oaxaca, and arbitrary arrests were mounting against the striking teachers. While indigenous women took over the government-controlled radio airwaves in Oaxaca to speak bitterness about the daily discrimination and indignities they endure, marches in Los Angeles and throughout the world joined the APPO (Popular Assembly of the Oaxacan People) in calling for the ouster of Oaxaca’s then-Governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz for his role in heavily repressing the teachers and their demands for reform (Stephen 2013, Jacinto 2012).

In 2010, I visited the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca for the first time. After attending a three-day conference in San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas, I traveled 12 hours by bus to visit Oaxaca City. Oaxaca, a center of some of Mexico’s most militant social movement activity, a cradle of Mesoamerican colors, flavors, and cultures, drew me in like it had so many others before me. I was sitting in a café not far from the zócalo, the historic city square that was both a tourist attraction and a center of the APPO occupation four years prior. There I came across a news item that announced a hunger strike taking place that very afternoon in the zócalo by representatives of an aggrieved indigenous community. Seven hours west of us, the Autonomous Municipality of San Juan Copala was still under siege by paramilitaries, earning it the title “Mexico’s Gaza.”
grabbed my voice recorder and walked down to the zócalo, where I stayed for much of the afternoon speaking with people who had escaped San Juan Copala. I interviewed spokespeople from the hunger strike and later published the interviews in a U.S.-based alternative magazine (Morosin 2010). I was anxious to know why armed paramilitaries were so hostile to this town’s ethnic Trique inhabitants who wanted political and cultural autonomy, and why they opened fire on a human rights caravan trying to bring water and food into San Juan Copala in April of 2010, killing two human rights workers from Finland and Mexico. In answering my questions, the speaker surmised that this violent conflict was about weakening and dividing indigenous people so as to gain dominion over their land. He said that deposits of silver and other minerals in the municipality of Juxtlahuaca were coveted by Canadian mining companies, and that the government did not support autonomy for San Juan Copala from the municipality, because it wanted to benefit from mining contracts.

So began my ongoing scholarly concern over the connection between natural resource extraction projects and political violence in the contemporary capitalist-imperialist world-system. I was especially interested in how conflicts over such projects were playing out in Mexico and how the affected communities were responding to foreign mining investment. Just days prior, in Chiapas, I had listened along with a diverse (e.g. French-Canadian, Mayan, South American) audience as UC Santa Barbara Sociologist William Robinson spoke about this very topic, at a conference on “Latin America and Global Capitalism.” Robinson warned of the danger of ethnocide in the Amazon, Colombia, and other places where mining, oil and energy companies need the
raw materials under the soil, but do not need the labor of local inhabitants. I learned that this situation can give rise to forced relocations, dispossession of communal resources, and armed violence against “surplus” populations who oppose these extractive projects on their ancestral lands.

Whereas the headline-grabbing APPO movement in 2006 was mainly an urban phenomenon, with barricades centered in Oaxaca’s capital city and some other flashpoints in the surrounding communities of the Valley of Oaxaca, this issue of mining that I had stumbled upon pointed toward rural conflict in agricultural or forest communities. The 400 different mining projects that exist throughout Oaxaca’s eight regions (35 of which are active) foreshadowed, at least to me, that all this controversial mining investment might bring more San Juan Copalas. Not a single one of these projects was approved through community consultation mandated by the United Nations’ Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, which Mexico voted to adopt in 2007 at the UN General Assembly (Assembly 2007).

Unlike the European-looking capital city that was my first introduction to Oaxaca, the center of gravity of this emerging anti-mine movement would be in the midst of Oaxaca’s valleys, plains, mountains and forests—world-renowned for their biodiversity as well as their cultural and linguistic diversity. These are the places that the tens of thousands of Oaxacan immigrants to the U.S. tend to come from, and many have been leaving permanently due to lack of subsistence options in these rural areas.

Some of my personal life experiences pulled me in the direction of seeking knowledge about these conditions. As a former Adult Education teacher, most of my
English as a Second Language students in the Los Angeles Community Adult Schools grew up in these kinds of communities in Mexico and Central America. Interacting with these immigrant students, and then marching with many of them in September 2006, made me more curious about how this current stage of resource imperialism creates the conditions for new coalitions of social and environmental movements to emerge.

As a very inexperienced Masters student, I had gone searching in 2010 to understand the legacy of Oaxaca’s 2006 APPO uprising. I eventually learned more about Oaxaca’s long history of indigenous organizing and defense of natural resources, and that neoliberal globalization was intensifying these conflicts while social movements and non-governmental organizations (NGO’s) were increasingly interlinking strategies and information throughout the Americas.

Mining conflicts that were already taking place (Velez Ascencio 2013), and the anti-mine groups that I would gradually get to know, are not only based in primarily rural areas; they are also about nature. They advocate for rural and indigenous people’s ability to inhabit and enjoy these places sustainably. They are class struggles within and between different ethnic groups over the social relations of landownership, and over the different meanings, memories, and agrarian arrangements in the Mexican countryside. And, anti-mine movements are examples of “high risk collective action” (Loveman 1998), which means that participants are vulnerable to state repression as well as paramilitary violence. As in much of the Global South and even parts of the Global North, “land defenders” in Oaxaca have endured threats, defamation and other forms of violence for their dissent and resistance against land-grabs (Morosin forthcoming), and for informing their
compatriots of their rights as landowners, citizens, and indigenous people. In the following Introduction, I situate these questions within the sociology of globalization, social movements, and inequalities of race, class and gender before outlining the key findings from each dissertation chapter.
INTRODUCTION
Framing the Research Problem

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How do indigenous cultures and local political logics interact to motivate and shape opposition to neoliberal economic globalization and resource extraction projects, despite the high risk of political repression that activists face? This dissertation is a case study on contemporary resistance to one of Southern Mexico’s recently decreed “Special Economic Zones,” sometimes referred to as the Trans-Isthmus Corridor, which incorporates parts of Oaxaca and Veracruz. This large project is seeking to convert the Isthmus of Tehuantepec region into a hub for investment, raw materials processing, trade and energy production. My study examines how the social relations of the Isthmus region (such as gender roles, prior political movements, and ethnic identities) influence the strategies and discourse of activist organizations opposed to the Special Economic Zone and its many related projects. I draw on extended direct observations of actions and meetings near the coastal side of the Isthmus between Ciudad Ixtepec to the west and Santo Domingo Zanatepec to the east, as well as interviews with activists and residents.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

My theoretical perspective is multi-level: It combines insights from critical globalization and world-systems analysis with scholarship on Latin America and Mexico. In doing this, I also engage Marxism, feminism, and theories of social movements. In framing how the globalization of capital generates ruptures in the social fabric of the Global South, I also pay considerable attention to subjective factors and culture—particularly how indigenous collective identity endures and evolves in interaction with
mobilizations for social change. In looking at the role of consciousness, my theoretical starting point has much in common with one writer’s valuable synthesis of materialist dialectics and poststructural feminist philosophy:

The subject does not act autonomously as a unitary entity, but as a contradictory complexity in dialectical relation to material conditions and as a complex manifestation and reaction towards those conditions. It is in this context that agency, the consciousness of human subjects, arises and transforms the material conditions in which it exists (Knehans 2007: 209).

Part of being consistently dialectical in one’s theoretical approach involves understanding how international, material factors set the contours within which social change and social conflicts proceed. At the same time, it entails guarding against determinism in social analysis, as well as eschewing the reification of social categories. In this project, which was undertaken in a multi-ethnic, majority-indigenous region where women are culturally exalted, this has meant rupturing with certain tendencies to view “women” as one undifferentiated category who are all involved in “resistance” simply by virtue of their gendered standpoint. It has meant rejecting the temptation to label indigenous people’s social movements as being directly “caused” by the commodification of their lands, or by some other oppression they directly experience. The way in which people respond to potential dispossession by forces of globalized capital is not automatic, but filtered through local actors and their socio-cultural contexts. At the same time, the fact that most of these organizations originate from an ostensibly “matrifocal” (female-centered) Zapotec culture does not imbue all activists with the exact same strategic understandings of culture and gender. Movement participants are having ongoing discussions about how
patriarchy and matriarchy ought to be conceptualized within efforts to “defend life” from transnational companies.

My approach is to identify how structural inequalities within indigenous territories impact who mobilizes (and how) against neoliberal infrastructure projects. This framework enables me to acknowledge that being “indigenous” and from the same community does not necessarily lead people to share a common political outlook.

At the same time, I am not suggesting that being Binnizá (Zapotec) or Ikoot (Huave) is “merely” a cognitive construction that is all in one’s mind. Attempting to erase social differences, and overlooking the importance of subjectivity, makes for bad analysis and also reinforces structural racism in which “white” (or, non-indigenous “Mexican” status) is the taken-for-granted reference point. As I show throughout my work, indigeneity (like “race”) is a real phenomenon and a potent social fact of life especially in the communities I spent time in. It connects to territory, language, patterns of social organization, and other significant collective customs. It is also a major facet of Mexican political and cultural reality that is trumpeted by the state itself, even as mainstream Mexican institutions do not directly acknowledge the unequal relations of exchange and dominance that systematically hold back indigenous people’s life chances.

Rather than reify the cultures of indigenous people by viewing them as static, inherently revolutionary, inherently ‘underdeveloped’, or innately environmentalist, I treat them as social products that undergo change as they interact with material (i.e. economic, production) relations of increased globalized investment. Not all aspects of “culture” are emancipatory or progressive, and there are various debates among ethnic
groups over the meaning and utility of certain customs and ideologies. These debates assert themselves within movements for social change that champion the humanity of racialized groups.

Influenced by environmental sociology and political ecology, I argue that the world-system has detonated deep changes in how states relate to indigenous groups and nature, and that these same global power relations are also compelling some members of indigenous groups to identify and question other inequalities, such as those based on gender. Ethnic identities as well as gender identities continue to experience strain and transformation due to the attempted domination of indigenous territories by the Mexican state and giant corporations, as well as due to the efforts of social movements to push back against these strains.

My theoretical perspective became clearer the more I interacted with respondents and with the data. I was puzzled by how anti-mining movements mobilize strategic essentialist notions of gender that they have inherited. Discursively, they rally to defend “life” and “mother earth” from the depredations of a masculinized system of “extractivism” that violates land and plunders resources without communal consent. This centers a socially constructed indigenous femininity into their collective action frames, which not all activists interpret the same way. Indigenous organizations are fluid sites that reproduce and contest gender norms as they confront the social and environmental threats of global capitalism.
RESISTING MEGAPROJECTS IN THE ISTMO

The policy designs of political and economic elites to appropriate cheap labor and abundant natural resources in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec have assumed various official names over the years and decades. They have been stalled by active transnational/regional resistance and other political roadblocks. From the Plan Puebla Panama, to Plan Mesoamerica or Mesoamerican Biological Corridor, the Megaproyecto del Istmo de Tehuantepec, and (at the time of fieldwork) the “Special Economic Zone of the Isthmus Corridor” (Rodriguez 2017), the Isthmus has long been slated for increased private investment due to its geo-strategic position as Mexico’s narrowest area between two oceans. Three Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in Southern Mexico were federally decreed by law prior to my first field research trip, and the SEZ of the Isthmus was gaining publicity during my 2016-2017 field stay (Harrup 2016).

This largescale reorganization of nature and space is of course not openly promoted as a way to enrich investors. Rather, it is legitimized by Mexican government agencies and the World Bank as a development opportunity for the people of the Isthmus region. The population, which is majority indigenous, is being prodded to adopt ecotourism, power generation, and exploitation of minerals/forests/biodiversity as a way to abandon “nonviable” occupations like small scale agriculture and fishing (Altamirano-Jiménez 2013).

The SEZ’s have significant social, political and environmental implications for local residents. The proposed SEZ in Oaxaca furnishes longstanding anti-systemic social movements with the challenge, and the opportunity, to surmount their philosophical and
regional differences. Groups are coming together to reject an entire development model that is understood as a regional expression of global capitalism. Local villagers have been increasingly coming to terms with how this project portends to displace them from their lands, forestry, and way of life in the name of progress. At the same time, they are also organizing a complex regional mobilization to oppose it. Both cognitively and politically, they are in engaged in a project that I call “confronting dispossession.”

Since this mobilization in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec has no official name, draws participation from many organizations (some pre-dating the announcement of mining exploration in the Isthmus) and is nested within multiple communities, I identify it as an indigenous movement for environmental justice. Throughout this dissertation, I also refer to a movement for defense of life and territory, a struggle for life, a socio-environmental movement and an eco-territorial mobilization.

Open-pit mines have been proposed by the Mexican federal government without fair and adequate community consultation in these areas for the mostly Zapotec, Ikoots, and Zoque inhabitants who will shoulder the risks of these projects. No comprehensive environmental impact study by the companies or the government exists thus far. While no mining is currently taking place in the Isthmus, about 70,000 hectares of land had been licensed to transnational corporations for metal mining at the time of my field research, and (according to many testimonies I heard) agents of the mining companies have long since been approaching landowners in the community to convince them to “rent” their

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1 As I explain in Chapter II, this loosely borrows from David Harvey’s (2003) concept of “accumulation by dispossession.” So as to broaden this term towards non-economic phenomena, Chapter VI additionally speaks to the cultural aspects of dispossession that I uncovered in this case study.
agricultural lands in exchange for economic assistance the mining representatives have been offering.

At the time of writing, in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, resistance to large incoming foreign mining projects remains in its preventive stages, since mines have not yet been installed. Over a short time period (beginning roughly in 2015), a broad array of grassroots activists, including farmers, professionals, environmentalists, youth, and other social groups have been fomenting pan-indigenous activism against the SEZ. Multiple types of groups, located in different towns and villages, are organizing in defense of their communal lands and territory against the private extractive companies that are seeking to appropriate the region’s rich natural resources. Besides recently discovered mineral deposits, this includes the development of its wind energy, forestry, agroindustry, petrochemical products, railways, and coastal tourism. In beginning this research project, I wanted to highlight the emerging resistance against potential mining projects in the Istmo, which so far has not been extensively studied, and connect that to a larger history of opposition to megaprojects in the region, which remains ongoing and whose details are better known by academics. For this reason, most of my data collection centered on organizations and individuals in and around the Oaxacan towns of Ciudad Ixtepec (pop. 29,000), San Francisco Ixhuatán (pop. 10,000), and Santo Domingo Zanatepec (pop. 7,000) who are directly adjacent to mining exploration activity. As discussed in the following methodological chapter, I worked with organizations in these towns that are involved in regional struggles to defend territory against mines and the Special Economic Zone/ Trans-Isthmus Corridor project as a whole.
Community members who identify with the indigenous “movement for life” view mining as the most destructive of all megaprojects that the SEZ would bring to the Isthmus. Though my analytical concerns originally focused on focus anti-mining movements, I could not justify a complete analytical isolation of mining from the entirety of the proposed Special Economic Zone. As many activists know very well, Mexico’s structural policy reforms facilitate megaproyectos of all kinds by opening up lands, resources and labor power to increased privatization. Instead of solely focusing on mining, I bring the mining industry and anti-mining activism in conversation with this larger developmental and political context, and with related activist campaigns for political rights, gender equality and land rights in the region.

In the midst of heightened drug-related violence and the risk of state/paramilitary repression, why would a mostly poor and marginalized population risk their safety to join a protest movement against infrastructure projects which the government says will ameliorate poverty? What would motivate so many people to declare their opposition to mining companies, even before a single mine has been installed? How does this struggle against broad, external, “macro” forces like transnational corporations and national state policy influence how these organizations conceptualize “local” or “micro” inequalities that predated the influx of mining capital?

Answering these questions, which flow from the main research question I began with, requires understanding how historical memory and cultural continuity give rise to a different political culture than exists in much of Western societies. These “recent grassroots struggles, while new in some ways, [are] the continuation of long histories of
resistance, rebellion, and accommodation” (Rubin 1994: 111). Many respondents harbor vivid memories of how the historical development of capitalism in the Isthmus has proceeded through a series of phases especially since the 1970s. Each new industry degraded the natural environment, transformed their living conditions, and influenced their own or their family’s participation in movements of resistance to economic and political opponents. The re-configuration of space, labor, and nature on a more thoroughly capitalist basis continues today on a grander scale, while activating movements of opposition around axes of class, ethnic autonomy, and gender.

In recounting how they first became politicized, many respondents describe their previous experiences in protesting the massive ongoing wind energy project in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. Activists in this indigenous-led movement have gradually come to see wind farms, mining, pipelines, commodification of lands, and the militarization of the region as the same unified threat. They equate the SEZ with injustice and plunder, and are working to convince the population in their towns of this framing. Organizers further make the claim that indigenous peoples have unique relationships with this territory that are violated by the government’s aggressive promotion of these projects. By blending respondents’ oral testimonies, primary and secondary observation of this movement’s actions and strategies, and some historical analysis of structural adjustment reforms that implicate the governance of natural resources, I detail how a culture of collective mobilization in the Isthmus has evolved and grown to face today’s new realities.
In short, for those who are willing to stand for what they see as “life” (la vida) against a “culture of death” (el extractivismo, la muerte), what is at stake is not simply the right to practice certain cultural customs. The zero-sum battles over the future of natural resource governance, and over the future character of regions like the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, undoubtedly implicate and are motivated by competing sets of ideologies over what constitutes viable “development” and over which type of life is worth living. What is at stake is the ability of distinct ethnic groups in a given territory to exist as they see fit, without fear of displacement, contamination, or militarization.

In this way, conflicts over mining in Oaxaca are about governance, the ability of people to decide what happens to their territory and the resources in it. These conflicts are also about social reproduction, in this case, the ability of rural indigenous communities to conserve their physical health, raise the next generation of children, and to maintain their way of life. We should pause to consider the strengths and problems of labeling this phenomenon a social movement.

CONCEPTUAL HURDLES: IDENTIFYING A “MOVEMENT”

The very title of this dissertation asserts that a social movement, or a collection of movements, is taking place in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. To paraphrase Marx’s critique of political economy, perhaps this takes for granted what it is supposed to explain. Sociology and Ethnic Studies Professor Alfredo Mirandé once suggested to me that the academic “social movement” framework may just be a Western construct that is imposed

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2 I appreciate Professor Jason Moore for pointing this out when I was presenting this research at the American Sociological Association Annual Meeting in 2017.
on an indigenous reality. Perhaps we sociologists rush to call something that people have been doing for centuries as part of their way of life a “movement.” After listening to my observations from my first trip to the Isthmus, an anthropologist based in Oaxaca named Paola María Sesia also questioned the appropriateness of this term. She proposed that there might simply be a collection of communities each with their own local dynamics and (ever-shifting, pragmatic) reasons for (apparently, at this point) saying “NO” to mining: a phenomenon too incoherent to be called a movement.

The fact that this dissertation is written in English to a mostly academic audience poses another challenge for the interpretation of my findings. While presenting preliminary results to a seminar of Mexican-trained anthropologists in Oaxaca in 2017, it was brought up that my choice to call my respondents “activists” represents a U.S. term that is foreign to what Oaxacans call themselves. Is the woman who volunteers to cook food for anti-mine forums not an activist helping her community stand up for its rights? Is the woman who organizes a women’s anti-mining collective, but doesn’t explicitly critique patriarchy, not engaged in feminist activism? Back-and-forth reflection between my data, English-language and Latin American writings, and colleagues on both sides of the border have made me appreciate the difficulties in making the most basic of analytical decisions that are all but second nature within the discipline of sociology that perhaps draw boundaries in the social world too hastily.

In fact, throughout this dissertation, I use concepts and terms that my respondents wouldn’t necessarily apply to themselves. For example, while some may agree to call themselves a movement, others see themselves building “processes of self-management”
or “struggles for the defense of territory.” The technical concepts an academic fieldworker uses in their final write-up are always and necessarily several steps removed from the perception most study participants spontaneously have of themselves and of their own actions. Additionally, the meaning of “social movements” is of course contested among academics themselves. Following Piven and Cloward’s classic study, social movements are acts of collective defiance (Piven and Cloward 1979: 5), and it is often the only recourse for influence that poor and oppressed people possess. For Piven and Cloward, acts of collective defiance entail violating traditions and laws that would normally be obeyed. In this definition, the individuals defying authority need to see themselves as acting as part of a larger group with some common set of beliefs.

For example, as the burgeoning studies on social movements by 1960s sociologists demarcated between institutionalized and non-institutionalized politics, sociologists claimed the latter as their intellectual territory and mostly conceded the former to political scientists. Today, McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001) challenge that boundary. For them, movements are a form of “contentious politics” that are usually “transgressive” (as in, where challengers adopt collective self-representations and/or means that are “unprecedented or forbidden within the regime in question”) (ibid: 8). “Repertoires of contention” have been defined as “the culturally encoded ways in which people interact in contentious politics” (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001: 16). Tarrow (2011: 8) says that all social movements employ “contentious collective action” that moves “ordinary people into people into confrontations with opponents, elites, or authorities.” The four essential features common to all movements are “collective
challenge, common purpose, social solidarity, and sustained interaction,” according to Tarrow (2011: 9). Meyer and Staggenborg (1996) adopt this same definition of a social movement. The organizations in my study fit this description. They make use of a mix of institutional and non-institutional tactics, including community assemblies, informative forums, marches, protests, legal proceedings, and alliances with NGOs.

Insofar as informal (or “transgressive”) political groups like the ones described above bring people together in regular interactions of social and political solidarity to challenge investment by transnational corporations and the state, they can be analyzed under the framework of social movements—especially because organizers also refer themselves as part of a movement (movimiento). I also use the term “activist” interchangeably with “participant,” though I acknowledge that respondents differ in their form and degree of involvement.

But the wholesale application of a modern, Western concept to an indigenous social world can still be questioned on various grounds. For one, to what extent do the values, strategies, and self-representations of the Comité Ixtepecano, or other groups introduced in this chapter, truly differ from those of the larger Isthmus of Tehuantepec population and its institutional norms? Are the Comité’s activities and beliefs “unprecedented” from those of the local Zapotec culture it comes from and claims to represent? If so, would this justify an analytical separation between “activists” on the one hand and “the masses” on the other? The extent to which the movement’s goals and strategies are defying tradition and authority, or in fact working to maintain a kind a status quo and re-establish authority by upholding and reinvigorating indigenous
traditions, is legitimately debatable. I am reminded of Piven and Cloward’s (1979) points that “radical” and “militant” are not necessarily synonymous because movements may indeed use militant methods in pursuit of non-radical goals. Since groups like the Comité Ixtepecano have had to defy certain institutional expectations, such as challenging the official Communal Lands Commission and mobilizing outside of it, they could be viewed as a social movement in Piven and Cloward’s definition.

Whether these forms of contention are rupturing with (or upholding) the popular cultural forms and values of Isthmus people, is perhaps not fully answerable at this point. In any case, the peoples of the Isthmus, just like the people under any society based on persistent inequality and/or undergoing external domination, have been organizing and participating in social movements long before modern analysts ever came up with the term.³

In order to coordinate and sustain collective challenges to elites, associations of people who lacked the advantages of institutional power had to develop organized, routine ways of voicing and legitimating their struggles for labor rights, land rights, and ethnic recognition. The same is true for today’s movements that are acting under new conditions of heightened resource commodification in a more globalized era. Their demands and strategies tend to embody an appeal to “indigenous” tradition instead of a defiance against tradition. But by demanding the cancellation of infrastructure projects such as wind energy parks and mines, these movements are locked in opposition with the

³ For an introduction into the last three centuries of Isthmus political conflicts, see Mirandé (2017, first chapter).
government, transnational capital, and mainstream environmentalism. Even though the anti-mine activists I research did not engage in illegal or highly disruptive mass actions against elites and their laws during my field research, their public meetings and other collective actions build what Morris and Braine (2001) call an oppositional consciousness (or consciencia) among groups of people that helps to construct certain patterns of authority as illegitimate. For example, there is a yearly national conference in Ixtepec entitled *El Extractivismo o La Vida* that draws hundreds of people, including speakers from Central America engaged in protests against extractive corporations. Local meetings in several Isthmus towns each draw dozens of people on a regular basis, while marches against mining may number in the hundreds and sometimes over several thousand.

These collective interactions serve to build up the social force that can rebuke free-trade plans and at the same time articulate critiques and alternatives to an alien, capitalist way of life which they and other Latin American movements and intellectuals have dubbed extractivism (e.g. Gudynas 2009). This consciousness itself is “non-institutional” because it stands outside the bounds of the dominant rationality of capitalist development. This kind of consciousness encourages people to imagine, and prepares them to act, towards transformative goals whose achievement implies (and often, openly advocates) the defeat of an entire economic and political model that is threatening ecosystems and social reproduction.

Movements resisting changes from above (and attempting to affect changes from below) are embedded in the historical-cultural patterns of local places (McAdam and Boudet 2012). Yet, they are also distinct from those typical patterns. This is because they
organize risky collective actions against more powerful groups and the ideas of those
groups (Tarrow 2011: 12). This takes subjective intentionality and leadership. Clearly,
even in a politicized space with a history of radicalism, only a relative handful of people
are willing and able to organize against economic and political authority in most
“normal” times, when institutions seem stable and legitimate to most people. This is
another reason that I justify drawing an analytical separation between the social
movements in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and the broad population, the latter of which is
very ethnically, ideologically, and socially diverse.

Tactics that are seen as helping the movement achieve its strategic goals include
the use of court injunctions (amparos) to challenge the legality of megaprojects (e.g.
López Gómez and Antennas 2016: 193, 1999), fundraising events for activist groups,
teach-ins, forums, the use of radio broadcasts and documentary screenings, marches,
petition drives, murals, press releases, the dissemination of NGO reports and journalism
about mining-related problems, and a regular flow of grassroots agitation. As varied and
sometimes well-attended as these actions are, they usually rely on perhaps a few dozen
core participants’ own time and energy, without paid staff. In this sense, they are similar
to the “emerging activist groups” studied by Blee (2012). She discusses how the groups
she studied in the city of Pittsburgh either collapsed or remained “fragile and tiny,” as
opposed to larger and more professionalized social movement organizations (SMOs) such
as labor and civil rights groups, “whose importance is clear and are likely to endure over
time” (Blee 2012: 6).
At the same time, many of the groups characterized are SMOs, since they have a fairly defined set of programmatic ideas, tactics, and internal roles. These groups align their claims with existing social movements, while attempting to implement those goals locally (McCarthy and Zald 1973: 1218). They have a sense of themselves and their mobilization as belonging to a larger struggle for indigenous and campesino rights in Mexico and beyond that is independent from electoral political parties. I would argue that this is a case of a social movement community composed of both SMOs as well as “emerging activist groups” (Blee 2012). Respondents are members of larger more formalized SMOs, small emerging activist networks, or both.

DISSERTATION OVERVIEW

Chapter I provides a summary of my methods and data. It explains how my critical ethnographic strategy and use of semi-structured interviews facilitated data collection and analysis. I discuss the sites of the investigation, the main organizations I profiled, the ways in which I gained access to these organizations, how I secured the consent of respondents, and my own positionality in this process.

Chapter II is largely theoretical. It lays out the macro-themes of this dissertation and works its way downward to explain how global power structures impinge on the lands and lives of ordinary people in Mexico’s Tehuantepec Isthmus. It first delves into the larger historical and global context that frames this particular case study. Following political ecologists and political economists, I evaluate how a global “race” for resources and precious minerals is contributing to disastrous climate change, social and economic marginalization especially of poor and indigenous people, and political violence. I
connect this to the “environmentalism of the poor” (Martinez Alier 2003), an environmentalism that seeks social justice. Moving to the national level, I treat Mexico’s latest mining boom as a response to the changing landscape of global capital accumulation in the late 20th century. I situate the recent “Isthmus Corridor Special Economic Zone,” and the recent mobilizations against it, within Mexico’s current history of environmental violence and “narco” conflicts. I make the case that by studying one Oaxacan region that has been in targeted for largescale resource commodification, we can better understand the socio-ecological crisis created by global capitalism. I then introduce Mexico’s Isthmus of Tehuantepec as an indigenous region whose historical memory of militant social movements has shaped its political dynamics down to today.

In this chapter, I also engage and briefly critique Karl Polanyi’s theory of “double movement,” as well as more recent Latin American theorizing on what is often called “the commons” and communalist movements. While partly embracing Polanyi’s theory of how waves of commodification spawn counter-movements, I address what I see as his Eurocentrism and determinism. I show how Polanyi’s model of the “double movement” can be applied to contemporary Latin American reality, which is characterized by higher levels of political violence and greater plurality of ethnic cultures. By addressing Polanyi, I also underscore a central concern of this dissertation: macro-processes and group-level subjugation do not simply cause counter-mobilizations. Radical protest movements against manifestations of world capitalism are situated within the logics of particular places and cultural patterns, and they also require intentional leadership and frameworks in order to convince people that change is necessary, possible, and worth the risks.
**Chapter III** examines how subaltern social groups are recruited into pre-emptive activism in response to potential threats to their place-based interests and values. It explores how social and cultural structures, collective action frames, and strategies inter-relate during periods of movement emergence (i.e. the early stages of a social movement). I argue that pre-existing oppositional cultures and legacies of prior struggles over land shape this movement’s *repertoires of contention*. Sociological theories of culture can be both useful and limiting when trying to understand how a movement centrally based on indigenous identity reflects (as well as skillfully modifies) cultural symbols while framing its grievances. This chapter accounts for the roots and form of the threat-based mobilization against mining companies, as well as its outcome of cultural continuity among Isthmenians, by synthesizing classic insights from the framing perspective with a structural framework on oppositional cultures. Contra Swidler (1986), I suggest that the collective mobilization of oppositional consciousness during “unsettled social periods” such as the tumultuous era we are now living through can contribute to *maintaining* and *deepening* cultures of opposition for suppressed cultures, rather than assimilating them into the dominant culture, as Swidler seems to imply.

**Chapter IV** is a theoretical exposition of my multilayered approach toward the interpretation and analysis of gender roles in the Istmo’s mobilization for life and territory. First, I offer my own critical reading of some of the literature on the allegedly matriarchal social structure of Isthmus Zapotec life. Drawing on traditional feminist social theory as well as indigenous feminist voices, I acknowledge that gender remains a fundamental axis of inequality in this region. I approach this problem by engaging with
social reproduction theory in the context of globalized capitalism’s plunderous relations of production. My reading of these multiple strands of literature leads me to an anti-colonial and materialist-feminist perspective, which I then apply in the following chapter.

**Chapter V** looks at how gender relations are expressed within grassroots political organizing in the Tehuantepec Isthmus. The chapter contributes to a longstanding discussion on gender roles in the Tehuantepec Isthmus by documenting how young indigenous feminists experience these gender relations. It proceeds from a contradiction: the Isthmus is famously referred to in historical literature and sensationalist Western reporting as a “matriarchy,” and much of the activist literature portrays women as leaders due to their social and biological roles as mothers and “nurturers.” Yet if we count the *campesino* sector as an arm of territorial defense, the leaders and strategists of anti-mine resistance in the Isthmus are mostly men, since decisions made in agrarian bodies are those of landholders that that are overwhelmingly mae.

I studied and was influenced by the many glowing representations of this culture’s “strong women” before ever setting foot in the Isthmus. During fieldwork, I was eager to ask a variety of women to articulate and defend their own views on whether and to what extent the Isthmus is matriarchal. I aimed to investigate how anti-mining organizations engage with the gendered social structure of the territories they are attempting to defend. Older male activists tended to proceed from the premise that their society was (and should be) female-centered. Women more often questioned and rejected this common knowledge, and pointed to stories of intense discrimination.
These findings diverged from the idealized matriarchal Zapotec ideal that I expected to find. They drove me to theorize how gender roles and ideologies interpenetrate with the activists’ social positions and life histories to influence their forms of political activity. I conclude that social inequalities, especially gender inequalities, within indigenous territories and among indigenous people are consequential for shaping who gets involved in the defense of land and culture against transnational capital and the state. This underscores the importance of analyzing social hierarchies at multiple social levels in order to understand how rural and indigenous movements negotiate or re-appraise their own local cultures as they mobilize against megaprojects of dispossession.

**Chapter VI** makes two arguments. I examine how economic and political elites took advantage of an earthquake in order to advance capital accumulation, and I consider how indigenous cultures of opposition and mutual aid provided a modicum of communal resilience when hundreds of thousands of people were thrust into the extreme difficulties of this natural disaster.

First, drawing on secondary reports and local testimonies that I gathered after the September 2017 “Chiapas earthquake” destroyed tens of thousands of homes in the Isthmus, I claim that national and local elites maneuvered in the wake of this disaster to reinforce social hierarchies in the region. This is evident in the numerous testimonies and media reports that showcased not only neglect of marginalized communities for months after the earthquake’s devastation, but also the government’s seemingly profit-driven rush to demolish homes that could have been refurbished. My experiences and reflections drew me to Short’s (2010) sociological take on genocide. Short revives the original
definition first coined by Raphael Lemkin (1944) in which cultural destruction of a group’s way of life can contribute to the wholesale annihilation of the group. As with Chapter III’s analysis of *comunalidad/Guendaliza’a*, Chapter VI emphasizes how the customs and practices among a group that reinforce their solidarity (in this case, the significance of their vernacular homes) can be vital for sustaining a mobilization against an illegitimate authority structure. Policies that sideline or disrupt this culture, such as neighborhood renewal carried out in the interest of elites, can exacerbate existing collective grievances.

Chapter VI also details how the same organizations that I was observing organize against mines and the Special Economic Zone in 2016 began to work strategically with NGO’s to rebuild homes and social solidarity immediately after the earthquake. In short, the defense of territory continued in new forms. While I engage the notion of the traditional indigenous home as culturally meaningful to local collective identity, I employ the term “cultural dispossession” to explain why movement organizations shifted their efforts to defend and refurbish the homes of *campesinos*, workers, and ordinary middle class people in the region. Activist groups and their supporters mobilized against the state and construction companies which proceeded to demolish these damaged homes and to replace them with structures that many community members found unacceptable.

Connecting cultural dispossession to cultural genocide extends this dissertation’s central concept of “dispossession” from material and economic phenomena to the symbolic realm. The case of the 2017 earthquake in Oaxaca showcases how the oppositional culture and strategies of social movements in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec are flexible to
sudden and externally imposed crises. This research further demonstrates how social movements actively shape the social construction of natural disasters by politicizing the official relief effort and by carrying out their own disaster responses.

The concluding chapter summarizes the implications, limitations and contributions of the case study. The Afterword provides an update on the organized opposition to megaprojects in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec since Mexico’s 2018 Presidential election. I consider these experiences of the Isthmus in light of ongoing social movements around resource extraction, dispossession, and gendered/indigenous/cultural resistance in the world-system of the early 21st century.
CHAPTER I
Data, Methods and Field Setting

A CASE STUDY OF MOBILIZATION

Every case study is composed of “generic units…which exist prior to research and are collectively recognized as valid by at least a subset of social scientists” (Ragin 1992: 8). The generic unit of my study consists of a social movement community, defined as a collection of interlocking organizations and individuals. As I will describe in this chapter, most organizations are local to the Isthmus, but some others are national and transnational. These organizations are composed of the community members who belong to them. Other residents who participate in actions that the organizations initiate, but who are not “organizers” per se, are also participants in this social movement community.

It is typical that “[s]pecific case categories…emerge or are delineated…after most of the empirical part of the project is completed” (Ragin 1992: 8-9). The specific categories of my case study became apparent only through the identification of patterns, anomalies and themes in the field data (Miles and Huberman 1994: 246). By documenting social patterns pertaining to the contemporary mobilization(s) for rights and territory in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, I moved towards explanation of the observed data in order to arrive at “plausible reasons for why things are happening as they are” (Miles and Huberman 1994: 90).

SUMMARY OF DATA AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This dissertation relies substantially on face-to-face semi-structured interviews and ethnographic participant observation. The selection of sites, methodology and strategies for securing the cooperation of informants had been informed by the pre-
dissertation research I carried out in Oaxaca in the summer of 2015. At that time, I was a
participant in the Oaxaca Summer Institute in Oaxaca City along with a dozen other
graduate students. Participating in this month-long program improved my ability to read
and communicate in Spanish, and updated my knowledge of Mexican history. It was here
where I befriended some of the first people who would become acquaintances and
informants. Among these, Jose Arenas from the town of Union Hidalgo is a Zapotec
indigenous artist and radio programmer with whom I have maintained contact. I began to
use chain referral sampling (Dahl et al 2013) throughout this still-exploratory phase of
field research to secure the consent of activist groups to be studied. Even when I was well
into the fieldwork with a couple dozen interviews completed, the process of meeting new
people and opening myself up to them continued, with some contacts never panning out,
and others blossoming into close relationships.

My dissertation fieldwork began in earnest over a year after my 2015 summer trip
to Oaxaca. Between September 2016 and March 2017, while living in Oaxaca
continuously, I conducted 42 digitally recorded, semi-structured interviews in Spanish
with a purposive sample of 51 consenting adult participants in Oaxaca’s anti-mine
movements (30 men, 21 women), mostly in and from the Isthmus. I returned in early
October of 2017 and remained until late December of that year conduct another 11
interviews with 13 interview respondents (6 men, 7 women), which included two men I
had already interviewed in more depth during my first trip. In Fall of 2017, I focused on
observing numerous meetings and events related to the natural disaster that had just hit
the area. I formally interviewed a total of 62 respondents for this dissertation (34 men, 28 women).

I selected multiple communities within Oaxaca, and targeted these participants, out of a desire to understand the factors that propel rural activists to prevent megaprojects from becoming installed adjacent to where they live. My observation of “interactions, understandings, and talk… [among movement elites as well as basic recruits]” (Benford 1997: 421), as well as semi-structured interviews, supplied the data for Chapters III, V and VI. Attending public events would often lead to interviews, which would then clue me into more public events which were happening where I could make new interview contacts. I would attend and take notes on film showings, campesino meetings, activist conferences, academic seminars where my respondents would speak, a large march, agricultural cooperatives, workshops, school assemblies, and local community radio transmissions. Sometimes I would rely on taxis to and public transportation while traveling alone, and other times I was invited to ride in respondents’ cars. After and during events, there would be time to have meals and talk informally.

I chose ethnography as a method because it is “concerned with the taken-for-granted aspects of life and its relationship with greater social structures…[P]articipating and interacting with individuals over the course of events and through time allows ethnographers to grasp a rich portrait of the social world they are studying” (Reyes 2018: 220). By seeking out, observing and interacting with communal mobilizations in Oaxaca over a total of 10 months, I began to understand how the building of a movement intersects with daily cultural patterns and local power relations. Taking and coding field
notes over a sustained period of time also facilitated an investigation of how the movement’s strategies and tactics are conceived, framed, interpreted, and received in the region.

My own ethnographic approach is influenced in part by Michael Burawoy’s extended case method due to my analytical concern for identifying how global economic forces shape grassroots resistance campaigns, and also how these global forces are interpreted and acted upon by movement participants. The extended case method “applies reflexive science to ethnography in order to extract the general from the unique, to move from the ‘micro’ to the ‘macro,’ and to connect the present to the past in anticipation of the future, all by building on pre-existing theory” (Burawoy 1998: 5). I moved from direct observations of discrete events to an analysis of social processes (i.e. anti-mining mobilization), and “up” to social structures (e.g. how social movement organizations resist, reinforce or otherwise affect pre-existing cultures and social hierarchies of the Istmo). I then aspired to refine existing theories, for example, by considering the role of gender, ethnicity, class, and place in these resistance movements while also situating such questions within the current evolution of world capitalism.

The semi-structured interview technique allowed me much insight into the personal lives of activists, as well as into the internal dynamics of activist organizations. Interviews help contextualize people’s attitudes, motivations and beliefs in ways that a written survey cannot. Though an open-ended survey of hundreds of residents and activists would possibly provide more generalizable results about how an entire subset of a community perceives a given social topic, surveys would simply not be feasible among
the movement participants who lack basic literacy, nor would they be appropriate in a setting where personal intimacy is essential for gaining informed consent. Semi-structured interviews permit the respondents to expound on the history of their involvement in a movement through its turning points. My interviews allowed me to access oral narratives that trace the intersection of respondents’ political involvement with their personal biographies. This was important for making sense of the larger social inequalities and indignities experienced over a lifetime that influenced a person to become a particular kind of activist (Talcott 2013). Interviews also gave me a way to explore “the complex ways in which movement ideas are interpreted both cognitively and emotionally by…members, targeted recruits, intended audiences, and others” (Blee and Taylor 2002). My interviews lasted over an hour on average (see Appendix). Crucial interviews were later transcribed by a total of 9 undergraduate research assistants at UC Riverside.

I began the dissertation research in Oaxaca City by getting to know NGOs and academics that eventually introduced me to organizations in the Istmo that would become the key actors in my case. The fieldwork utilized snowball sampling (Atkinson and Flint 2001) to locate networks of respondents. At forums, workshops, meetings, and cultural events, I introduced myself to participants as a U.S.-based sociologist who was writing about mining-related conflicts in Mexico in hopes of understanding the anti-mining community’s views, and declared my intention to publicize their struggle. The logic of inquiry was interpretive and inductive. Whether I was having informal conversations at typical social events (fiestas, velas), observing a political meeting (in which I was often
asked to introduce myself or lend words of support), or interviewing campesinos, teachers and NGO members, I sought to “capture the worlds of the people by describing their situations, thoughts, feelings and actions and by relying on portraying the research participants’ lives and voices” (Charmaz 2004: 499). Interviews took place in respondents’ homes, in agricultural co-op meeting halls, in cafes and restaurants, and at movement-related events. I did not compensate interview respondents with cash, but when interviews were lengthy, I offered to pay for their meal and/or their transportation.

Reyes (2018) discusses how the transparency and accuracy of ethnographic research can be enhanced by “naming places, naming people, and sharing data.” I employ a combination of all three tactics. The names of all geographic locations and towns are accurate. Nearly all interviewees preferred to give their actual names rather than remain anonymous. (Those few who wished to be anonymous are noted in the text). Furthermore, though I mainly refrained from interjecting my personal views inappropriately during meetings and interviews, I never adopted the pretense of neutrality. I did make it clear to research participants and people whom I would meet in Mexico that from what I had read about open pit-mining as an environmental sociologist, I do not believe that Mexico is benefiting from such projects. I also communicated that I was prepared to get involved. I attempted to make clear my willingness to offer support to the movement, though I left it up to respondents to propose which kind of support was most useful to them. I would say that I did not wish to see the Isthmo fall victim to mining-related conflicts and environmental devastation like so many other Latin American regions had, so I accepted that part of the responsibility for the defense of territory fell to
me, as a researcher embedded in the community. However, I attempted to make it clear to respondents that my research would be unlikely to determine the outcome of the conflicts they are involved in. I can publicize my dissertation to students, independent media and activists that I know and have access to in the U.S., but I do not have any formal leverage to affect mining policies, as I do not work on behalf of any government or corporation. Once field respondents gained the sense that I was genuinely interested, and decided that my research questions also interested them, it seems that people participated in interviews out of intrinsic interest, rather than out of seeking some direct material incentive.

I later concluded that I would have never gained access to these respondents if I had introduced myself as a U.S.-based researcher interested in why people oppose mines, but declared myself non-committal and “neutral” in the conflict. Activists rightfully are concerned about unknown persons coming into the community to surveil and gather information, and they likely would have never tolerated my uninvited presence unless I could convince them that I was not in fact “a spy for the mines” or the U.S. government. I was aware, and people often mentioned, that in the year 2000, the Oaxacan government encouraged its police agencies to collaborate with the military to prevent unrest against the North American Free Trade Agreement (Arronte, Castro-Soto and Lewis 2000). In 2006, a Lieutenant General in the US military worked with a U.S. geographer to map terrain in Oaxaca’s Sierra Juarez mountains to gather intelligence and forecast future conflicts without the consent of those communities (Boyce and Cash 2013, Bryan and Wood 2015).
Such egregious breaches of trust in the research process, with the duplicitous collusion of major government institutions, are not the norm in all of social science today, but the damage done is longlasting. This local example shows how researchers can become willing or unwitting collaborators with governments and with imperialism, towards which vulnerable people are absolutely right to be skeptical. But even the most carefully planned field research projects done for the “right” reasons and without outside corporate or government sponsors can end up hurting their respondents and/or reproducing asymmetries of power, such as being used by colonial and military powers against the very populations we live with and study (Price 2011). This brings up the role of my own positionality in the research process.

**CRITICAL ETHNOGRAPHY AND POSITIONALITY OF THE RESEARCHER**

I have sought to anchor this dissertation in the practice of *critical ethnography*, which aims to amplify the voices of the unheard and learn from the individuals whose active search for freedom provides meaning and dignity to their lives (Foley 2002, Madison 2011). In this critical ethnographic enterprise, the ethical questions of research become even more salient. This obliges the writer to address their own “positionality” for epistemological and methodological reasons.

The social status of the researcher is sure to influence the collection and interpretation of data in one fashion or another. I am an Italian American male from a middle class background who was first drawn toward global justice (e.g. anti-sweatshop and anti-war) activism in high school. No one in my family could be classified as an “activist,” save for a great-grandfather in Italy whom I never knew but who was said to
be a committed anti-fascist during the times of Mussolini. Somewhere along the way in learning about history, participating in the punk rock music scene in the San Francisco Bay Area, and writing/editing for my high school newspaper, I developed a penchant for digging beneath the façade of American consumerism and its jaggedly uneven social structure. Thanks to these more immediate social influences and a very lucky undergraduate education, I became motivated to expose truths that could, as a recent document puts it, “promote the understanding of how the world works, from a perspective that views the world as a unified exploitative whole that is polarized and inequitable” (PEWS Proposed Mission Statement 2019).

In other words, I perceived that the power relations in our society and the world are the cause of much needless suffering. I still believe this, though my understanding has become more systematic. Since my youth, I have wanted to uncover the hidden (or simply unseen, unacknowledged) relationships of coercion, exploitation, and degradation that seem to undergird so much of the very “usos y costumbres” that we in the “First World” take for granted. Thus, like many others before me, I have often seen social science research as one possible tool to recognize how our “way of life” is predicated on denying and negating the lives of “others.”

I share this to convey that I embarked on this particular research project with my own kind of biases. I was already persuaded that the world-system’s rapaciousness for endless profits and raw materials ultimately degrades our own lives, relationships, and communities in addition to those throughout the globe that many of our tribe the
Nacirema would be unable to find on a map. I designed this dissertation while cognizant that women’s liberation from oppression was a global issue of our time. As I touch on in this dissertation, land use and life chances in Mexico’s rural communities relate back to U.S. trade policies and migration, as well as Canadian foreign policies that give backing to Canada’s very powerful mining companies which have entered Mexico and Latin America at a dizzying rate. Researching the role of mining companies in local indigenous communities also involves other rapidly industrializing countries like China and India whose demand for minerals and raw materials ever grows. Resource extraction thus has always been a world-systemic issue that implicates all of us.

In noting how I first encountered the politics of human rights in Oaxaca by joining a march in Los Angeles, my Preface retraced some of the steps I took that brought me in deeper. The personal/biographical factors that I have reflected upon in this section have motivated me to study how imperialist consumerism rests on social and environmental plunder, and to critically understand how people cope with having their territories zoned for increased extraction. If this is one’s concern, then what could be more basic than going to the sites where the metals used to assemble so many of our industrial and luxury goods are dug out of the ground? This is to say, my own upbringing and conceptual frameworks brought me to the point where I could study how the extraction of natural resources relates to issues of power and culture on local, regional, and national levels.

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4 Usos y costumbres is a phrase typically applied to indigenous people in Mexico, sometimes respectfully and other times degradingly, to denote their internal customs and socio-political norms that appear distinct to those of the mainstream society. I thank my research participants for reminding me that “Los Nacirema” (The Americans) have their own curious usos y costumbres, their own rituals owing to a consumerist culture, just like an anthropologist brilliantly and sardonically pointed out half a century ago (Miner 1956).
national and global scales. My “positionality” also influenced which part of the world I decided upon, the kinds of questions I would ask, and how I went about answering them.

As a tall male foreigner with light skin, it did take a period of time to build rapport among movement participants. But the process was not as treacherous and awkward as I feared it would be. The fact that I had published an article drawn from interviews with indigenous leaders in one of Oaxaca’s most intense conflicts (Morosin 2010) helped to facilitate conversation and convey my sincere longstanding interest in Oaxacan activism. In spite of some lapses in communication and embarrassment on my part, my near-fluent Spanish helped to traverse the cultural-linguistic barrier between myself and interviewees to the point where at least we could communicate fairly fluidly.

Being able to speak Spanish and having some working knowledge about Mexican politics traced back to my involvement in radical social movements in the United States, and my having been an English as a Second Language instructor in Los Angeles adult schools. In this way, my own background provided some entry points and common areas of concern between myself and some respondents. However, my own personal background, views and history of activism did not always come up in discussion. In interactions with participants, I usually held back from offering my own personal beliefs and from talking about myself, my own history. This was partly due to my fear that I would “bias the data” by influencing respondents to tell me things that would merely confirm my own worldview and research assumptions. I also assumed that casually inserting all my critical views about mining policies and world politics with strangers (or even with close hosts) could draw the attention of possible criminals, paramilitaries, and
government personnel. I thought this could lead other movement organizations to misunderstand or mistrust me, and it might also make the groups who were talking to me further targets of the state. It could get them into trouble with their opponents among the population itself, or with people they are working to recruit. I believe these concerns were justified, but in hindsight, I do feel that I could have spoken more about myself and about my research, even when respondents seemed uninterested in it or too busy with their own lives to hear more about “my project.” Being more transparent about my own thoughts, my doubts, and the personal trajectory that brought me to this project (as I discussed above) could possibly have put respondents more at ease about me and my role in the community. While these kinds of balances must always be struck in fieldwork, volunteering more information about myself and my academic process in this manner may have further addressed some of these issues of reciprocity and positionality. This in turn might have allowed me to access new or richer data.

My research followed the ethical responsibility to uphold “moral principles of human freedom and well-being, and hence a compassion for the suffering of living beings” (Madison 2005: 5). I strived to practice patience, sympathetic listening and intellectual openness throughout the journey. But the project was not without ethical predicaments. I concur with Bosk and De Vries (2010) that being an informant to a critical ethnographer is inherently risky for participants of social movements in a semi-authoritarian state. While I was sometimes nervous about how carrying out this research could put me in danger, I also continually considered how my very presence could complicate the lives of respondents. Try as we might to identify the costs and benefits to
informants of participating in our research, ethnographers “cannot specify risks because we do not know what we will find, what interpretive frameworks we will develop for reporting what we do observe, and how the world around us will change to make those findings seem more or less significant” (Bosk and De Vries 2010: 253). I realized that even the use of pseudonyms for individuals is “rife with overlapping ethical, political, methodological, and personal dilemmas” (Guenther 2009: 412).

No option here was ideal. For instance, publishing the life stories of activists with pseudonyms does not guarantee confidentiality. It may still have the effect of stoking divisions within a movement in favor of one faction or another, of causing organizations to lose valued resources, of bringing shame and embarrassment to participants or their families, or of angering mining company representatives or government functionaries who might then work to disrupt activist groups, to name a few consequences. On the other hand, a strict policy of anonymity for activist respondents may actually contribute to the silencing of these people’s stories and voices. As part of their fight to be heard in a world that silences them all too often, some social movement participants may wish to draw attention to their cause and have their names printed as a sign of integrity. The fact that they may come to later regret those decisions, and may not fully appreciate the ramifications of going on record, also signals the researcher’s responsibility to make difficult judgment calls. All told, deciding how to collect and report field data from movements that have been targeted by formidable opponents is an act of power that carries certain moral duties. Naming respondents may increase academic rigor but violate broader ethical standards, such as by opening them to public scrutiny and attack.
Publishing names may also expose respondents to a flurry of future researchers who can easily look them up and approach them for interviews for the remainder of their lives (Contreras 2019).

Conscious of the need to “give back” to field participants for all of these reasons, I took a number of actions throughout the data gathering process, and well into the writing process, to reduce the social distance between myself and the respondents who were gracious enough to speak with me about their lives and their views. First, I remained available by phone, email and social media to respondents who wished to talk, ask questions, and update me on issues they felt I should be aware of. I donated money at events, and online on a few occasions. I circulated organizations’ online petitions for solidarity and for funds, especially following the earthquake in the Istmo that most of my respondents and friends were harmed by. Close informants requested that I bring them back certain goods from the United States which they found to be cheaper or superior, and that they offered to pay for in whole in part. When this involved items useful for their organizing such as a hard drive or a cell phone, I happily obliged. But at times I could not agree, either due to inconvenience or ethical and legal considerations, such as when someone asked if I could get them a gun for their own protection.

I sent drafts of my work for key respondents to comment on, and I provided as many people as I could (whose email contacts I had) with a preliminary summary of this dissertation (in Spanish) which condensed its main theories, questions, findings and implications. While many people I sent these documents to (or handed them personally to) did not respond, several did. These people commented on my work or discussed it in
person. Furthermore, I have shared my writings and initial findings with academics who are based in the region who either know my field respondents or have similar areas of expertise. Even before I sent the dissertation summary to my contacts, I sent respondents who could be reached over email a full transcription and/or an audio file of our digitally recorded interview. I feel this helped establish some transparency and accountability. This was evident in how one respondent thanked me for being “responsible” by sending her our interview audio files and transcription. Making this raw data available to the respondents themselves would aid them in systematizing and disseminating their own oral narratives to Spanish-speaking publics. It could also potentially help them gain visibility since it demonstrates that someone connected to an institution like the University of California is interested in their testimonies and sympathetic to their aims. I am open to having my interpretations corrected through further engagement with respondents and with Oaxacan audiences as I work to produce a book and other publications out of this project.

Finally, as often as I could, I volunteered to translate articles and statements into English for local organizations and academics who have been of great help to me in the field, and whose work I feel is performing a critical service that English-speaking audiences deserve to know about.

**SITES AND ORGANIZATIONS**

My most consistent observations and interviews took place in the communities of Ciudad Ixtepec (population 11,000), San Francisco Ixhuatán (population circa 9,000) and Santo Domingo Zanatepec (population circa 7,000). Since I wanted to analyze how
mobilizations for territorial and environmental rights are becoming an ever more regional phenomenon, I settled on three main locations whose organizations overlap, but who also have their own particular cultures of activism in their own local towns. These three municipalities are either legally implicated by mining proposals because some of their lands have been licensed for mineral exploration, or they stand to be directly affected by pollution if the several mining projects proposed for the Isthmus become constructed. Each town also has a collection of actors whose focus on political, environmental and land issues has made them willing to oppose the Special Economic Zone in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec.

Many of the local organizations in these towns are affiliated with a recently formed coalition of Isthmus activists that goes by the name of APOYO (Articulación de Pueblos Originarios Del Istmo En Defensa Del Territorio, or Articulation of Original Peoples of the Isthmus in Defense of Territory). In the relatively more urbanized town of Ixtepec, my main work consisted of attending events put on by the Comité Ixtepecano en Defensa de La Vida y el Territorio (Ixtepecan Committee in Defense of Life and Territory), while interviewing the Comité Ixtepecano’s members and supporters with various levels of involvement in the movement. Ciudad Ixtepec is located in the municipality of Ixtepec, some of whose lands have been implicated in a mining project by Canadian corporations who have explored the region for gold without prior knowledge and consent of the community.

The other two principal field sites are semi-rural economies that center on agriculture, animal husbandry, and fishing, with a significant sector of the population also
working in small shops and other services. In Ixhuatán, I spent time with key students and coordinators of Preparatoria Comunitaria José Martí, a radical community high school whose teachers impart a vision of social justice that guides students to reflect on and organize against social, political and environmental problems in the region through an indigenous perspective. After my first field stay, some informative articles on this school began to be published by education scholars based in Veracruz who had studied the school ethnographically (Baronnet 2017; Escalón Portilla and González Gaudiano 2017).

In Zanatepec, I got to know members of a community radio station called Radio Guluchi, some members of *campesino* organizations, and the *Grupo Ecologista Zanatepec* (Zanatepec Environmental Group, or GEZ), a civil association whose members see themselves as environmental and social activists against mining and the Special Economic Zones. The GEZ also remains active in other locally based environmental advocacy. The municipality of Zanatepec borders territory in the Chimalapa mountains where residents are in dispute over a potential mining project, especially in the remote community of La Cristalina. I did not visit La Cristalina, but the contention there over mining exploration has motivated much organizing and debate in nearby Zanatepec.

When pertinent, I also visited other localities in the Isthmus region to perform observations and/or interviews. These included Juchitán de Zaragoza, Union Hidalgo, San Francisco del Mar Pueblo Viejo, and San Miguel Chimalapa. While doing exploratory work and getting to know other (non-Isthmus) anti-mining organizations and
experiences in the state in fall of 2016, I also made brief visits to small communities in Oaxaca’s Mixteca, Sierra Norte, and Valley regions. These regions are at least several hours removed from the Isthmus, but they are closely implicated in the larger patterns of socio-environmental conflict, paramilitarism and mining-related violence that inspired this dissertation. Some of the work I did in those places helped me better understand the political and legal aspects of mining exploration in Oaxaca, and they also helped introduce me to field contacts that later made my research in the Istmo more successful and enjoyable.

Other movement actors contributed to the Isthmus mobilization via diffusion of information, communications training, and informal advising. These were more professionalized groups based outside of the Isthmus who usually exercised a more technical or organizational support role in the movement. Since their leadership did not live in the affected Isthmus communities full-time, nor did they make direct decisions in local strategies of land defense, I did not seek them out as my main informants, as I was mainly involved in recording the life experiences of those directly organizing on-the-ground strategies for defense of land and resources against appropriation and dispossession. But in the dissertation, I note when key informants were affiliated with these national or transnational organizations.

The national NGO known as REMA (Red Mexicana de Afectados Por la Minería, or National Network of Mexicans Affected by Mining) is dedicated to informing communities affected by mining projects on exercising their rights to suspend and contest these projects. This is usually done by training people to use (or revive) local decision-
making structures that mining companies attempt to penetrate or sidestep, such as the communal assemblies, ejidos, and bienes comunales of a community (for more on this, see Chapter III). At the time of my fieldwork, one leader in Ixtepec and one in Zanatepec worked closely with REMA. One REMA contact who has advised these groups was based in the Sierra of Guerrero, one of Mexico’s poorest and most insecure rural areas, where kidnapping, toxic open-pit mining, organized crime, and leftist movements co-exist and contend. This person attended the November 20 mega-march in Zanatepec against mining and later gave me a short and very informative interview while we were both at an event in Mexico City that commemorated the assassination of Honduran environmentalist Berta Caceres. This is evidence that the organizing being done is not solely local, as it includes advisors and supporters who frequently travel throughout Mexico and who also highlight the international scope of environmental justice.

*Ojo de Agua Comunicacion* are another NGO, based in Oaxaca City, and specializing in indigenous communication strategies. They do not directly get involved in politics as an association, but their presence is fundamental in training the community radio stations who go on to serve as the voice of community defense and cultural renovation in many rural areas. One informant, Felipe La Bastida of Zanatepec, commented to me that “*Ojo de Agua* have been a very important form of support in this anti-mine struggle. They help us record and produce audios that are transmitted by radio to inform the people.”

*Ojo de Agua* also produce wonderful short films and organize a yearly film and community radio festival, along with co-sponsoring workshops on how to maintain
community radio stations. The films are solicited throughout Mexico and Central America and screened in both trendy urban spaces in the heart of Oaxaca City as well as outlying communities who are experiencing, or could soon become host to, socio-environmental conflicts around hydroelectric dams, mines, agribusiness, and other scenarios. The DVD packet with all the films from Ojo de Agua’s *Fiesta de Cine y Radio Comunitaria* ends up in the hands of local movement organizers and direct land defenders, who then screen these films in their own communities in order to engender dialogue about place, gender, cultural diversity, respect for ancestral customs, and about other rural and indigenous movements taking place in Oaxaca and Mesoamerica. This savvy and counter-hegemonic use of technology contributes substantially to an ethic, a vocabulary, and a *culture of solidarity* (Fantasia 1988) that encompasses multiple movements. *Ojo de Agua*’s cinematic and media-based activism is similar to how local opponents of hydraulic fracturing in the U.S. have used documentaries as a recruiting tool (Vasi et al 2015). Gravante (2016) also does a remarkable job of highlighting the role of digital alternative communication and internet activism in Oaxaca’s 2006 “APPO” insurrection.

The town of Zanatepec was my first entry point into Isthmus politics, in spite of it being more remote from Oaxaca City compared to the other Isthmus communities I worked in (it is only one hour from the border with the state of Chiapas). In November of 2016, I attended an *Ojo de Agua* conference on the outskirts on community radio broadcasting. The workshop was on the outskirts of Zanatepec at an old liberation theology-affiliated building called “CECACI Juntos En El Camino, A.C.” Formed in
1992, the name stands for Centro Campesino de Asesoría y Capacitación Integral, or Campesino Center for Assistance and Integral Training (Ruiz 2016). Here I met several of the activists who served as key informants and introduced me to others, via snowball sampling. The conference was attended by two dozen community radio producers and was led by an Ojo de Agua volunteer from Veracruz who welcomed me to participate after I made clear that I was writing a dissertation in support of the communities affected by mining. I was later offered a dorm at CECACI on subsequent trips back to Zanatepec. The meager dwelling was largely abandoned after years of neglect, but the arrangement worked out. I felt guilty about occupying a whole bedroom to myself in the family home of a young Radio Guluchi activist, as I did when I first arrived in Zanatepec, so I stayed at CECACI alone whenever I was in Zanatepec throughout the rest of my visits. The following section addresses how I accomplished and analyzed the field data from this dissertation’s three empirical chapters.

Methodological Notes by Chapter

Chapter III draws on firsthand participation in some of the first meetings that the APOYO coalition was convening in the region about mining and environmental justice issues. Thanks to meeting Dr. Paola María Sesia, a local professor of anthropology, at the Oaxaca Summer Institute, I got to know members of Ojo de Agua Comunicacion in Oaxaca City who recommended I speak to Manuel Antonio Ruiz of the Preparatoria José Martí high school in Ixhuatán. Similarly, after having attended some interesting discussions and workshops with the NGO group SURCO in Oaxaca and telling them about my project, they contacted Comité Ixtepecano on my behalf, who said they were
willing to meet with me so as to allow me to conduct my dissertation research. Also, while visiting the town of Capulalpam de Mendez in the Sierra Norte, I met a member of Ojo de Agua who recommended I call Alejandro Velasquez of the Grupo Ecologista Zanatepec to learn about their stance on mining. All of these contacts enabled me to eventually attend the meetings that I describe in this chapter, which I arrived at while traveling in the back of pickup trucks with the organizers, in taxis, or in cars driven by APOYO members. I attended more of these kinds of meetings and forums than I could detail in this chapter or in this dissertation, but I selected these encounters and interview quotes for Chapter III based on their clear connection to this social movement’s discursive frames and political strategies.

My research for Chapter V (with Chapter IV as a theoretical foundation for my study of gendered processes) is based on my conversations, interviews and experiences living among the “social movement community” in Mexico’s Isthmus of Tehuantepec. As noted, this is a broad political community that encompasses anti-mine activists, campesinos, NGOs, feminists, teachers, liberation theologists and other respondents whom I interacted with throughout the courses of this project. Though I had discussions about gender with various respondents, I opted to organize this chapter around the starkest contrast I found in interviews, which was between older activist men and younger women.

The observations and interview data for Chapter VI were mostly collected in the towns of Ixtepec, Ixhuatán, and Union Hidalgo (population circa 15,000). A smaller portion of observations and interviews were related to the earthquake were done in
Juchitán and Zanatepec. I did not focus much in Juchitán (or during the dissertation as a whole) because Juchitán is a larger city which has already received much attention from scholars and journalists. On average, smaller communities are more marginalized in terms of resources. It is also these smaller, more rural places that are more directly affected by mining concessions. Juchitán as an urban municipality does not have any mining exploration within its borders (though it is certainly at the forefront of anti-wind park mobilizations, which have already been extensively studied by other scholars and journalists). Focusing on how the earthquake impacted the territorial disputes and environmental organizing in these smaller towns establishes some continuity with the prior chapters. Seeing that I was finding many meetings and events in which to participate in Ixtepec, Union Hidalgo, and Ixhuatán, I did not have as much time to re-visit Zanatepec regularly during this earthquake-related research trip. But this makes some intellectual sense, since the goal of that research trip was to document how social movement organizations continued to advance their mobilization under the changed objective conditions posed by the natural disaster. Perhaps due to its geographic location, Zanatepec was significantly less physically and socially impacted by the earthquake than Ixtepec and Ixhuatán, in which I opted to reside and study.

Drawing on prior connections with movement-oriented groups, I was permitted to join and take notes on public meetings in Ixtepec, Union Hidalgo, Ixhuatán, and Juchitán. These meetings were organized by community groups for earthquake survivors. Presentations and proposals were made by activists and NGO workers about how to approach earthquake reconstruction while protecting the culture and rights of the region’s
people. I also attended local community radio broadcasts in Union Hidalgo with 
Colectivo Binni Cubi, volunteered at Centros de Acopio (makeshift relief centers) 
managed by community activists, and performed house visits to interview earthquake 
victims that these grassroots activists referred me to. 

Attending public meetings about “social reconstruction” allowed me to interview 
15 respondents about the earthquakes during this period in their damaged homes. Some 
of these interviews took place in groups due to the respondents being family members. 
All were conducted in Spanish, recorded with oral consent of the respondents, and most 
were transcribed for further analysis. These respondents were overwhelmingly supportive 
of the region’s anti-mining movement and skeptical of the Special Economic Zone. 
While discussing their experiences surviving the quake, they critiqued the government’s 
post-earthquake policies in light of the social, ecological and political contradictions that 
they experience in their lives. Finally, Chapter VI references relevant news media reports, 
social movement documents, NGO papers and government reports in order to triangulate 
what respondents told me about how the earthquake affected their social worlds, and how 
they sought to mobilize politically amidst the destruction caused by the earthquake and 
its thousands of aftershocks.
CHAPTER II
Social Crisis, Ecological Crisis: Oaxaca’s Socio-Environmental Conflicts in Global Perspective

“There should be no confusion about the central theme: the resistance (local and global) expressed in many idioms to the abuse of the natural environment and the loss of livelihoods.”
Joan Martinez Alier, *The Environmentalism of the Poor*

We live in an era of immense economic growth, in a world-economy that integrates more people into its networks of communication and information than ever before. At the same time, that growth is as uneven as ever. The economic value produced by labor and made possible by nature is channeled through the prevailing capitalist relations of competitive private ownership and control. Political ecologists have long noted that economic expansion in one region may displace human communities and deplete resources in that region, while the rents and profits from this “local” industry end up in far-flung cities, banks and other foreign accounts. Our ecosystems that sustain all life are on the precipice of irreversible degradation, and even collapse, in the face of accelerating climate change caused by human activity.\(^5\)

In spite of over twenty-five years of United Nations conferences on climate change, our global environmental emergency has grown more dire. There is a clear scientific consensus that limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius is the only way to save virtually all coral reefs, all summer Arctic Ocean Ice, and to avoid all-around extreme weather changes. The Chair of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has stated that containing global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius would require

\(^5\) For a useful review of the natural science literature on climate change and how sociologists have responded to it, see Lever-Tracy (2008).
rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society” (Masson-Delmotte et al 2018). Environmental threats to people’s livelihoods, are (like systemic financial risks) unevenly distributed across the world’s regions, nation-states, and social groups.

The nature of capitalism as a system of endless expansion of socially produced surplus values depends on the perpetual externalization of socio-environmental hazards. Constant competitive profit-making would be impossible without a steady supply of cheap inputs that form the material basis of all goods and services produced. The system is historically driven to expand its commodity and labor markets into more corners of the globe, and to tap natural resources as a free gift of nature. Environmental historian Jason Moore (2011, 2015) argues, capitalism’s successful access to low-cost food, fuel, labor and energy kept production costs sufficiently low (i.e. on a system-level, worldwide) for competitive world accumulation to continue over the past several centuries. But this is changing.

The development of capitalism has been punctuated by two world wars, a great depression, an array of institutionalized social exclusions from liberal democracy, and supremacy of the financial owners of economic power. But on average, rising wages helped the system reproduce itself, especially in the post-World War II era in the West. From plantations to industry, and mass production into the information era, labor productivity grew and profits could be sustained thanks to what Moore calls the “four

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6 This alone is a strong reason to study, learn from, and participate in social movements advocating precisely for such radical social changes, which this dissertation strives to do.
cheaps:” cheap food, fuel, labor, and energy. This confluence of factors allowed economic expansion to continue past the middle of the 20th century. Capital could technically innovate its means of production and exchange on the basis of the four cheaps.

The 21st century will be quite different. The overall costs of production are now rising. We find ourselves in an era where “the erosion of these four cheaps invariably signals a cascading collapse of investment opportunities” (Moore 2011: 137). As competing blocs of capital around the world rush to secure advantages in the ownership and control of food, fuel, labor and energy, capital ends up undermining its own conditions of expansion as it over-exploits “the global commons”: the very air, oceans, forests, and biodiversity on which life depends (Goldman 1998).

This crisis of global political economy is intimately intertwined with the global environmental emergency. Economic and political institutions that reinforce unplanned, anarchic growth have been the central drivers of environmental crisis, and the main barrier to solving it. There is a window of time (perhaps a couple decades) within which we may still be able to mount such a large-scale response to global climate change in order to stave off the most severe effects of a warmed planet. I have formulated and conducted this dissertation research with these pressing global crises in mind.

More central to this dissertation are the ecological effects of capital’s drive to colonize and extract the world’s remaining mineral wealth. These effects on specific sites can be observed in real-time, and have been steadily chronicled, through the methods of natural science. Arsenic and mercury run-off from open-pit mining takes place quickly
and has measurable effects on those in direct proximity, who are usually
socioeconomically marginalized in relation to their host country governments and to
international institutions. But these toxic externalities of particular industrial enterprises
have both individual effects (such as birth defects on a fetus) and sociological impacts
(such as provoking the breakdown social solidarity once mines become active in towns
[Hortensia 2014]). How ethnic groups, communities, political organizations, and their
overlapping individual members interpret, plan for, accept, or challenge environmental
racism, what influences the forms of their collective agency, who they see as responsible
for the problem(s), and who they see as natural allies, are sociological question with
global implications.

Indigenous people and so-called Third World societies can be seen as “canaries in
the coal mine” of global environmental consciousness, in two ways. First, their
contentious encounters and pitched battles with transnational capital’s frantic attempt to
secure cheap inputs for production alerts us to how environmental problems are
interwoven with social relations of power. Conflicts will grow over who will control the
rights to the global environmental commons, and in what form they will be managed—
not just in the Global South but in the Global North as well. Second, the ideologies,
values, and social relations of reciprocity that such populations draw on to defend their

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7 This also reflects Thomas Hall and James Fenelon’s point that “the survival of indigenous peoples, their
identities, and their cultures, constitutes strong antisystemic resistance against global capitalism and against
the deepening and the broadening of modern world-systemic or globalization processes.” Hall and Fenelon
(2004) convincingly show that indigenous people generally represent non-capitalist relations. Their forms
of social organization succeed not as a direct economic, military, or political challenge to global
domination, but rather as a fundamentally cultural challenge to the logic of 21st century capitalism and
nation states.
natural spaces and their social reproduction often pose a direct counter to the quantitative, neoliberal language of resource governance. Whether they are named as environmental justice, socio-environmental movements (as they are referred to in Latin America), or the defense of territory, these movements exemplify how classes, gender identities, cultures and power are continually being remade in nation-states and localities. This occurs through the interaction of world market conditions and the initiative of concrete persons and organizations that are responding to globalization. Against this backdrop of global elites’ “race for resources” in the world-system (Bunker 2005), my analysis mainly focuses on how people mobilize the symbols, understanding and resources at their disposal to resist being dispossessed. They adapt inherited cultural frameworks to pursue (or perhaps, redefine) their interests, values, and ethno-political identities in the face of global threats, challenges and opportunities.

Some might say that an ethnographic study in one sub-national region with only a couple hundred informants cannot reveal much generalizable knowledge about how global institutions impact large groups of people, or what to do about it. It can be alleged that the scope is too limited, and the researcher is too partisan, for such a study to illuminate how social structures shape, constrain and facilitate individuals’ active pursuit of a new relationship with their material environment. It may further be asserted that this research cannot be “global or transnational,” because it does not engage in cross-national comparison over time and its subjects are mostly not acting with “the world” in mind. I believe all of these charges would be mistaken.
The degree of creativity and resilience shown by environmental justice activism, counter-hegemonic political forces in Latin America, and the localized resistance of indigenous peoples shall crucially influence whether (and how) our existing states, economies and value systems can be repurposed in a way that affirms the web of life on our planet. These actors are agents of an environmental ethic that is socially forward-looking, rather than nativist, retrograde, and reactionary. Their territories contain much of the potential for cheap food, fuel, energy and labor coveted by nation-states and transnational capital.

Where environmental justice movements are unwilling to rent out their territories and lands to energy, agribusiness and mineral companies, their direct defense of clean air and water is not only a rejection of neoliberalism. The cry of “NO” to mining and Special Economic Zones simultaneously poses the need to redistribute wealth and decision-making from national and global elites downward to the majority of humanity, particularly to semi-colonized peoples whose human rights continue to be curtailed by modern states. Theirs is not an “environmentalism” that seeks to pull up the drawbridges of the nation in order to keep pristine resources in the hands of the privileged few, or that is content to advocate small-scale lifestyle changes and modest policy reforms. Rural Oaxacans experience “nature” through their productive, cultural, and political relationships with the land. Even if indigenous people in my study do not own land, and/or are primarily urban, they often enact their ancestors’ connection to the land—a memory so central to 20th century Mexico. They also experience globalization in myriad ways, but they do not reject modernity and internationalism for conservative localism.
This is what makes environmental justice movements such a hopeful and rich trend to reckon with as we move into what looks to be a century fraught with new violent contests over who gets to survive the socio-ecological crisis, and who has a legitimate claim to enjoy and appropriate the dwindling sources of cheap food, labor, energy, and fuel. At the same time, cases like that of the Tehuantepec Isthmus extend notions of environmental justice or the environmentalism of the poor to people and communities who are racialized as indigenous with unique cultural and ethnic histories.

Many of my respondents have reflected upon how their activism in a very specific locale (Oaxaca’s Isthmus of Tehuantepec) “fits into” their identity as descendants of Latin America’s original inhabitants. The subjective experience of indigeneity (while of course shaped by race and class relations, and riven with internal conflicts) offers a common way of being, of maintaining one’s place not just in the community, but in the world. The “defense of territory” that this identity is increasingly channeled into and merged with is most definitely oriented towards inheriting and sharing nature with others, throughout the Americas and the world.

Zapotecs who wish to continue living in their ancestral lands while preserving their livelihoods (not for endless expansion, but for equitable subsistence) don’t wish to dominate and rule over others, and they merely want “all pueblos of the world” (as one of my indigenous activist respondents from Juchitán put it) to be able to do the same. This ethos directly clashes with not only the logic of private ownership and competitive accumulation, but, potentially, the physical force of bulldozers, paramilitaries, federal police, and jails. I discuss this Zapotec culture in greater depth in Chapter III.
In short, for those who are willing to stand for what they see as “life” (la vida) against a “culture of death” (el extractivismo, la muerte), what is at stake is not simply the recuperation and defense of, say, quaint Zapotec ideas that, after all, have their right to exist in a multicultural nation. It is all too often people’s physical bodies that are threatened by, or fall victim to, the violence of other individuals and of dispossession. The zero-sum battles over the future of natural resource governance, and over the future character of regions like the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, undoubtedly implicate and are motivated by competing sets of ideologies over what constitutes viable “development” and over which type of life is worth living. Indigenous people frequently disagree over this themselves, and are not some harmonious whole. But when battle lines become drawn and people prepare for a political showdown over the future of their peoplehood and of their region, with all emotionally charged identities this involves, what is at stake is the ability of distinct ethnic groups in a given territory to exist as they see fit, without fear of displacement, contamination, or repressive violence.

When we study how groups, organizations, communities and whole societies directly affected by the privatization and extraction of natural resources respond to these industries, we may learn potential examples of alternative resource management and values that can guide the way out of the social and ecological crisis to a more sustainable and rational world based on substantive human solidarity. Those who subsist in informal household and village economies depend on the natural environment as a supplement (or in fewer cases, a complete alternative) to the wage labor system that has excluded them. Such communities are invisible to the capitalist world economy, at least in the sense that
their production and exchange transactions aren’t counted in official economic growth aggregates which only measure quantifiable trade and production. Yet, they become quite visible when they challenge transnational corporate plunder of their land.

My dissertation hones in on the three aforementioned processes or sets of actors that are fundamental for the future of global social change: the nexus between social and environmental politics; indigenous people who reside in increasingly contested territories; and the current shifts within Latin America between reactionary regimes and potentially revolutionary movements from below.

ACCUMULATION BY DISPOSSESSION AND NEW SOCIO-ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENTS IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

“Radical commons movements are as much about struggles over what counts as nature as they are struggles over class formation, nation building, gender forging and race boundary-making.”
Michael Goldman, Privatizing Nature

The nascent struggles against resource extraction in the Global South differ from traditional environmental social movements because they merge both environmental and social demands in the face of violence by states and large-scale extractive capital. Environmental violence⁸ is occurring as states reproduce uneven power relations with the specific goal of opening new frontiers of the natural environment to capital accumulation. This implies “profound deleterious social and environmental consequences that directly and indirectly constrain human action both locally and globally” (Narchi 2015: 6).

Geographer David Harvey points out that many of the processes Marx called

⁸ For an overview of the concept of environmental violence and its application to contemporary Latin American cases, see Narchi (2015).
“primitive accumulation” continue in today’s global economy, in even more honed and expanded ways. According to this analysis, *accumulation by dispossession* “release[s] a set of assets (including labour power) at very low (and in some instances zero) cost. Overaccumulated capital can seize hold of such assets and immediately turn them to profitable use” (Harvey 2003: 149). Though these policies often threaten both local ecology as well as local human populations, they have particularly harmed poor women by disrupting the subsistence production in which women tend to be concentrated (Shiva 1989, Cabezas et al 2005).

Dispossession of communal property, together with privatization of industries, has proceeded as part of economic globalization since the 1980s. This supplanting of communal property rights for private profit exemplifies Harvey’s concept of accumulation by dispossession. Prominent Indian activist and physicist Vandana Shiva has long argued the lure of technological progress through resource extraction relies on systematic violence, enclosures, and looting of forests, water, and natural resources (Shiva 2016). While neoliberalism should not be understood as an unchanging and undifferentiated global force, the local outcomes of its imposed development projects appear strikingly similar. Particularly in rural peripheries of a globalizing world economy, the relations and structures of neoliberal capitalism continue to clash with the reproduction of non-market cultural values. This erodes the ability of smallholders such as Oaxacan *campesinos* (both male and female) to sustain their material livelihoods.

As a wave of accumulation by dispossession has accelerated since the 1980s, intra-national struggles for the defense of territory in developing countries have attracted
increasing support from rural populations and allied anti-systemic movements, as well as more attention from scholars in a range of disciplines. The conceptualization of “territory” by Latin American social movements and by Oaxacan anti-mining struggles, for example, is often conceived and framed in terms of indigenous or economic sovereignty over communally owned land and resources (Rojas 2010). While immediately reacting to local state policies and local elites, this political conception of territory opposes the regimes of financial dispossession that have been enacted by national elites and global elites as part of structural adjustment and capitalist modernization.

Likewise, Dwivedi (2001: 28) predicts the “sharpening of resource struggles and conflicts at the local level as a result of increasing market and state-led drives for resource development.” As a result, “the intensification of resource conflicts around issues of land and forest rights and access to water and shelter will be central to the agenda of [Global South] environmental movements” (ibid: 28). Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have documented a very recent rise in the killings of activists in lesser-developed countries who defend land and other natural resources (Witness 2014).

Mexico is a prime case of a society whose recent wave of privatizations (Castillo Mussot et al 2018) have made life more precarious for the poor and working majority. Mexico also endures high rates of gender-based violence against women (Gamlin and Hawkes 2018), deadly threats to environmentalists (Hallam 2017), and is the world’s second most dangerous country for journalists. The transfer of Mexico’s state-owned mineral rights to private corporations has been studied as an instantiation of accumulation
by dispossession by neo-Marxist and feminist scholars in Latin America (e.g. Tischler and Navarro 2011, Navarro 2013, Navarro 2015, Gutiérrez Aguilar 2013) whose insights I seek to build on in this work.

Social movements who act in defense of “the commons” (see for example Goldman 1998, Federici 2011, and the cases outlined in Navarro and Composto 2014) aim to strengthen self-determination over land, nature and the production of use-values essential for life (Navarro 2013: pg. 78). These are collective attempts to protect natural resources and communal property/relationships based on the land from private investment. They have matured into political battles that reflect a new stage of transnational social movements (Foyer and Kervan 2015). In the words of Argentine sociologist Maristella Svampa (2011), we are witnessing an “eco-territorial turn” in Latin American grassroots struggles, where movements frequently utilize legal and juridical channels to reduce and avert the privatization of forests, soil, water, and minerals. In Mexico, it has become more common for such groups to coalesce in extra-territorial networks offering each other mutual support and visibility. Whenever possible, local groups have been experimenting with collective mechanisms for the autonomous management of lands and resources. According to Navarro (2013), this results in a new political subjectivity, centering on the concepts of territory and community, that has empowered socio-environmental movements to confront forms of capitalism that are once again (or perhaps, continually and cyclically) encroaching upon the commons/

Previous scholarship on Latin American grassroots opposition to resource extraction (e.g. López, and Vértiz 2014, Moody 2007, Veltmeyer and Petras 2014, Narchi
2015) attempts to explain mobilization by highlighting the importance of social class and indigenous ethnicity. While resistance to transnational mining capital in Latin American societies is certainly shaped by class and environmental consciousness, it is also shaped by the national and regional context.

The national context: Mexico’s neoliberal mining boom

In the wake of a global commodities boom driven largely by demand from new consumer classes in India and China at the turn of the 21st century, global mining now boasts the highest average profit rate of all other economic sectors in the world, with a 37 percent average return on investment. The Latin American region has become an “extraction frontier” for minerals and metal commodities in the last decade with 25 percent of the world’s total investment in mineral exploration, a virtually unprecedented development since the colonial era (Urkidi 2011).

While Latin American cases of environmental violence and resource extraction conflicts abound from various countries (Bury 2004, 2008; Urkidi and Walter 2011), Mexico has come to play a particularly important structural role as haven for transnational mining capital. Constitutional reforms, lax environmental laws, low taxes, and no restrictions on foreign ownership have made Mexico the primary recipient of foreign direct investment in mineral exploration in all of Latin America (Tetreault, 2014a), mostly to extract silver, gold, copper and other metals. The recent book by Francisco Lopez Barcenas (2017) treats this contemporary stage of “mineral extractivism” (el nuevo extractivismo minero) as the latest iteration of four centuries of
dispossession (*despojo*) that the mostly foreign-owned mining industry has wrought in his native Mexico.

The consequences of various “macro” forces and policy decisions at the national and global level provide the backdrop for the “micro” mobilizations and struggles at the regional, municipal, village, organizational, and individual levels that are examined in the present study. Rearranging Mexico’s economy and politics from a corporatist, nationalist, state-centered development model to one based on private investment and an export-based strategy of comparative advantage began in the early 1990s. This neoliberal restructuring has left no social sector untouched. Based on the need to attract transnational investment capital, this development strategy has led to growth (even spectacular wealth) in some national sectors. But it has mostly brought increased economic turbulence and inequality. Mexico’s financial system suffered collapse in the so-called tequila crisis (1994-95), but this was only a prelude to the U.S.-centered financial crisis in 2009, which severely interrupted the flow of remittances from Mexican immigrant workers and contracted Mexican GDP by 6.6 percent in 2009 (Villareal 2010).

By the onset of the 2009 crisis and the resulting global recession, most Central and South American governments had already de-linked, in varying degrees, from the neoliberal model’s economic orthodoxy (Chase-Dunn, Morosin and Alvarez, 2015; Lievesley and Ludlam 2009). Mexico, however, a world-scale oil producer and prime U.S. ally in the region, re-dedicated itself to neoliberal economics and governance in the wake of the 2009 crisis. As Mexico’s exports and its manufacturing sector sharply declined in 2009, the administration of Felipe Calderon pursued a host of political and
economic reforms (continued by the six years of his presidential successor, with few modifications) which revived an older trade structure based on natural resources. Two decades after NAFTA promised factory jobs and industrialization, this current strategy is accentuating Mexico’s role as a geopolitical outpost for primary products such as food, energy, water, timber, and minerals. Investigative journalist turned Sociologist Dawn Paley, in her book *Drug War Capitalism* (2014), convincingly uses case material from several Latin American countries (including Mexico’s extremely deadly “drug war”) to argue that states and paramilitaries utilize violence to open new territories to privatization and direct investment, thereby attempting to overcome barriers to capital accumulation, especially in mining and petroleum industries (see also Paley 2015).

Both the rapid numeric increase in foreign-owned mining operations and the introduction of qualitatively more polluting technologies have politicized and polarized numerous rural and indigenous communities in recent years. Consider one startling statistic: new mining technology has allowed companies to extract twice as much gold and silver from Mexico since the beginning of the millennium as was extracted in the past 300 years (Lopez Barcenas, 2011; Veltmeyer and Petras, 2014). Metal smelting strongly contributes to air pollution, while leaching involves the extremely intensive use of water. These mining practices have been widely reported by local residents and NGOs to drain community water sources for small-scale agriculture and increased soil and air pollution, directly imperiling the health and life chances of nearby populations (Tetreault 2014a).
As the economic size of its capital-intensive natural resource sector increases relative to its labor-intensive manufacturing sector, it would appear that the changing structure of investment is leading to novel forms of political resistance and new coalitions of political actors at the grassroots level. “Socio-environmental conflicts” or “ecoterritorial struggles” are known as such since they “hinge on both ecological and distributional issues” (Tetreault 2015: 49). These movements draw the leadership of “relatively poor smallholder farmers and indigenous groups whose livelihoods, health, and cultural landscapes are threatened” by resource extraction (ibid: 61). The central demand of these groups is to keep natural resources outside the realm of the private market, in essence to defend natural resource commons from encroachment. These groups argue that extracting resources would entail physically displacing people from their lands or dispossessing them of their means to live. Many, but not all, involve women at various levels. The demand to prevent the dispossession of the commons parallels other demands to halt the “commodification of life” (Navarro 2013), the same rallying cry of the Occupy movement at its 2011 inception in New York City.

A study by Mexican researchers (Toledo et al 2015) coded nine types of socio-environmental conflicts in Mexico from articles in national media, which also counted the number of municipalities and the number of states undergoing each type of conflict. By far, “mining-related conflicts” affected the largest proportion of municipalities (79).9

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9 This number includes protests aimed at stopping mining exploitation in a given site from getting started. The second most prominent socio-environmental conflict was “hydraulic” (65 municipalities), followed by “energy-related” (52) and “urban” (26).
These relatively recent changes in the nature of Mexico’s integration into global investment patterns, resulting in intensification of resource extraction to meet global market demand, make Mexico a prime site to study how social movements in rural areas have maintained their political and cultural identities while innovating their strategies. We lack sociological research contextualizing how rural and indigenous social movements are reacting to this spike in large-scale mining investment. I intend to help fill this gap by interpreting how this investment contributes to new insurgent political subjectivities, and how anti-mining movements in Mexico relate to existing territorial conflicts and battles against global capitalism within Mexico and Latin America as a whole.

*Capital’s race for resources vs. communal efforts to defend ‘the commons’: Polanyi’s ‘double movement’ in Latin America*

As scholars continue to grapple with neoliberal globalization’s inequalities and conflicts, social scientists from various disciplines have been gaining new appreciation for Karl Polanyi’s ([1944] 2001) magisterial work of economic history, *The Great Transformation*. Polanyi’s formulation of the “double movement” has been used to conceptualize how capitalist markets spawn social movements that help change the institutional structures of the capitalist world-economy over time (Boswell and Chase-Dunn 2011). This concept helps us situate the recent mining boom within a larger cycle of commodification and resistance that is playing itself out widely across Latin America, particularly throughout Mexico.
Even if we include the decade since the global financial crisis of 2009\textsuperscript{10}, our current phase of globalization that commenced with the neoliberal revolution of the early 1980s parallels capitalism’s late 19\textsuperscript{th} century period of expansion. The post-1990s explosion of financial services, trade, deregulation, and the movement of people, goods and capital across borders is well known. Countries whose workers were not previously available to international capital (Russia, Eastern Europe, and China) have become integrated into the political and economic structures of the larger system, while most other countries have adopted (or been compelled to adopt) structural adjustment and free trade deals that have deeply transformed their societies. NAFTA in Mexico exemplifies the latter case, where a semiperipheral capitalist society has had its banking, agriculture, and manufacturing pried open to foreign investment, while its land, natural resources and its peoples’ labor power have become further commodified.

As Polanyi would remind us, the state has played a central organizing role in lubricating and enforcing this latest wave of commodification. The Mexican state’s role in bringing about the neoliberal transformation of its polity and economy since the 1980s exemplifies Polanyi’s concept of the “always embedded economy.” In other words, the liberalization of so many of its formerly state-protected or communally managed resources could not have been achieved absent the state’s instituting a complex series of new rules, social structures and laws.\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{10} Martin Cypher (2010) argues that Mexico’s GDP fell by 6.5\% in inflation-adjusted terms in 2009 due to Mexico’s deep dependence on U.S. foreign investment that its policymakers had crafted.

\textsuperscript{11} The fact that the Mexican state’s “official” rule of law and security have most recently broken down and given way to widespread violence and corruption, as criminal gangs seem to have increasingly penetrated the state itself and proceed to enrich themselves through further terrorizing populations, is an important
Extending and deepening market relations together with technological gains represents the first wave of what Polanyi called the “double movement.” He looked at the spread of market liberalism in the developed capitalist world before World War I, and recoiled at the utopian idea that markets could self-regulate. He observed how workers’ movements, farmers, small business owners, and (eventually) governments moved to curb the disruptive power of markets that was introducing such immiseration and volatility into the fabric of society. Since this organized reaction to market liberalism aims to preserve and restore traditional social relations, it represents the other side of the double movement. Polanyi noted how the reaction to the vagaries of the market can take diverse forms: extreme traditionalism i.e. fascism or religious fundamentalism; social reform such as the 1930s New Deal; or communism, for example.

Writing during the immediate Post World War II period, Polanyi had high hopes that the New Deal was just the beginning, and that social(ist) reform would ever more decisively re-embed capitalist markets under the rational and democratic direction of society as a whole. Today’s double movement is proceeding under very different circumstances. A few key differences must be accounted for before Polanyi’s concept can be applied in a satisfying way to early 21st century movements for the defense of natural resources from corporate exploitation.

First, the philosophies that informed the regulatory, “social movement half” of the double movement in the 40s and 50s have been largely discredited/defeated. “Free
market” triumphalism has been hegemonic in the ideological and policy spheres. Any resurgent popularity of reformist ideas, and any critique of neoliberalism since the chaos of the 2008 economic crisis has been miniscule (especially in the core of the system, i.e. Western Europe and the United States) compared to the legitimacy that such progressive ideas enjoyed in the mid-20th century (Piore 2008). Crucially, in the early 21st century, no powerful state or collection of states exists is currently checking the geopolitical ambitions of Western imperialism and delivering a clear ideological/military defeat of fascism. The USSR occupied that role as Polanyi was writing The Great Transformation, and the polarized contest taking place between capitalism and Marxism clearly influenced Polanyi’s great work. Today’s pluralistic movement of resistance to market liberalism and the intellectual trends associated with these movements lack the cohesion and the material force that made the ‘old global left’ a serious player on the world stage throughout the Cold War. Today’s global balance between forces of revolution and forces of the brutal status quo is far less favorable, in the short run. But as previously mentioned, the contemporary wave of the “double movement” is becoming more networked across regions and borders, and more widespread, the more that resource commodification disrupts ecosystems and threatens the values that broad segments of society have a stake in.12

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12 In the time since I’ve begun conceptualizing this dissertation project, the rise to power of more openly fascistic governments and political forces in the U.S. and Brazil, and in various other countries, seems to be both a response to objective problems of capitalism as well as a reaction to the “threat” of these growing social movements. Most of these neo-fascist and authoritarian forces are also violently racist, pro-resource extraction, and climate change denialists who are taking the shape of a “global police state” (Robinson 2019). This ascendance of new fascist political forces speeds up the social-ecological crisis and further complicates the Polanyian optimism that the market will soon be brought under social control by ethical
Particularly in the Global South but also in the North, today’s social movements have been quite willing to disrupt natural resource commodification, both in the name of stopping climate change and in the name of social justice. Such movements work to restore the balance between territory, nature and communities that neoliberal markets have upended. The loud “NO” from the South in response to corporate and state appropriation of natural resources is more prominent than any clear programmatic alternatives to this extractive model of capitalism, but some movement sectors have lent support to left-leaning populist political candidates and governments in an effort to reign in rampant inequalities, especially in South America. Herein lies another difficulty in applying Polanyi’s concept to the upsurge of anti-mining activity: the “double movement” analogy was mainly, if not exclusively, Eurocentric in focus.

In making his case for the double movement, Polanyi largely got his data from the rise of capitalism in England. He saw how labor movements and other forces pushed for greater provisioning of public goods, and redistribution of surplus. As Block (2008: 38) observes, “The double movement is about the normal politics of market societies with democratic governance, where adherents of both laissez-faire and the protective counter movement are able to press their case in the political arena.” To be sure, Latin American countries after the Cold War better approximate this ideal “democratic” type than they did under the conditions of civil war and/or military dictatorship that were prevalent until the early 1990s. Still, as formerly colonized societies, Latin American countries don’t

social actors. Dealing with the rise of a “New Right” which includes neo-fascism is an urgent political and intellectual project that is not directly addressed in this dissertation.
easily fit Polanyi’s schema. Mexico is nominally democratic, and the opponents of neoliberalism do have some room to “press their case in the political arena,” though again, the neoliberal state and drug-related violence has been constricting the ability of progressive and dissident movements to influence policies and gain a hearing. Waves of commodification are being contested by efforts to re-embed the market in social relations and humanistic morality all over Mexico. But the contention is admittedly more violent and less orderly than Polanyi envisioned the process unfolding in “democratic” core capitalist societies like England and the United States. Even on the day of writing this section, some months after the inauguration of new Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, a contact in Oaxaca made sure to alert me that a teacher activist in Oaxaca and an environmental activist in Puebla had just been killed.

In this way, at first glance, Mexico may not offer an ideal fit for Polanyi’s “double movement” due to its semiperipheral and semi-authoritarian status, but Polanyi left other cues that give us ample reason to consider Mexico (and indeed Latin America as a whole) as a contemporary stage where dynamics of market liberalization and resistance are in tension. Namely, as Block (2008) makes clear, Polanyi’s double movement is not simply bound within discrete nation states; it occurs transnationally. This remains a major contribution of his conceptual apparatus. Polanyi demonstrates how “how social struggles within particular polities were constrained and limited by the nation’s particular position within the global system of states. This meant that the two movements were not simply national phenomena, but global phenomena” (38). In this perspective, the setting for Mexico’s opposition to mining is set by the unfolding of the
double movement across the factories, farms, cities and mines of Latin America, even while national and sub-national processes have some degree of their own autonomy and particularities.

To the extent that we can widen our temporal and spatial lens, the double movement can be traced across at least the past two decades of Latin American history in the following way: Accumulation by dispossession has accelerated new enclosures of the global water, air, land and resource commons. A roughly two decades-long commodities boom has propelled a series of state-supported encroachments on communal natural resource management. The main architects and beneficiaries of this intensified commodification of natural resources have been mining giants, energy conglomerates, exporters of hydrocarbons, and the major stockholders of these assets. Governments of different stripes, such as progressives, populists, “21st century socialists,” and authoritarian neoliberals have also participated in the mining bonanza, but their role as usurpers is secondary to that of private, resource-seeking capital. Tax revenue and foreign exchange earnings could flow into state coffers as long as resource prices remained high. But the vast majority of value from mineral extraction, particularly in a state like Mexico, flowed out of the country, due to low or nonexistent state-imposed royalties. Polanyi’s double movement is useful for historicizing how the dispossession of people from their common land and resource rights has driven farmers, indigenous people, and other popular sectors to push back, and to share information and experiences amongst each other.

In Andean states like Ecuador and Bolivia, Polanyi’s model perhaps explain the
structural background for how the Pink Tide regimes of Rafael Correa and Evo Morales came to power in the early 2000’s thanks to the militancy of eco-territorial movements. In Mexico, the aforementioned statistic that “mining-related conflicts” are the most prominent socio-environmental conflicts throughout the country reflects how the expansion of market principles in the countryside has given rise to a countermovement. But this “countermovement” in Latin America takes place under conditions of more extreme violence, resource dependence, and colonization than Polanyi seemed to assume.

Polanyi was correct that it is irrational to subjugate “the substance of society itself to the laws of the market” [Polanyi 1957, 71]). In his view, land was the natural habitat of human beings. Liberalization of mineral rights impinges on numerous values and practices in which the post-revolutionary Mexican economy was embedded, such as the national ownership of subsoil resources, the reverence for peasant agriculture, the right to health, and communal land rights. Anti-mining groups like those in this dissertation aim to restore these values, protect resources and local property rights, and strengthen local control of land. Incidentally, land (along with labor and money) represents one of Polanyi’s “fictitious commodities.” I embrace Polanyi’s concept up to a point, but not in a deterministic way.

Some claim that Polanyi’s “double movement” is just as disembodied, deterministic and depersonalized as the very models he was criticizing (i.e. the extreme of the “self-regulating market” on the one hand and the “inevitability” of socialist revolution on the other). Scholars who have levied the charge of functionalism against Polanyi for his “double movement” trope may have a point. Among those who take issue
with Polanyi’s under-specification of concrete power relations, Munck (2006) asks “who precisely would ‘spontaneously’ move against the unregulated, disembedded market system and why?” Learning “why” organized opposition to mining gets off the ground, and how that process of mobilization is nurtured by mutually reinforcing (and usually pre-existing) movement organizations, repertoires of contention and social/political identities is at the core of this dissertation. This brings to mind Weber’s dictum that all social behavior is imbued with meanings that social science must then interpret (Brysk 2000). Answering the first part of Munck’s question (“who?”) directly leads to my focus on Mexican and the state of Oaxaca.

Local political context: mining companies and indigenous peoples in the state of Oaxaca

Mexico’s indigenous populations tend to populate regions where key resources such as mines, hydroelectric power, forests and bioreserves are sought by national and global investors (Iturralde 1992: 14). Almost all socio-environmental conflicts currently taking place within Mexico involve foreign investors. Slightly over half of the country’s high-profile mining conflicts involve indigenous people, while only about 12 percent of Mexico’s population is indigenous (Tetreault 2014b).

According to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples which Mexico signed in 2007, indigenous communities have the right to be consulted, in good faith, about any legislative or administrative measure that will affect them (Lopez Barcenas 2011a). Systematic violation of these rights in favor of increasing mining
concessions and other large development projects has aggravated territorial conflicts in indigenous zones of Mexico (Panico and Orozco 2010).

The large southern state of Oaxaca, Mexico’s most diverse in terms of indigenous languages spoken and its fourth poorest state (Coneval 2012), has become a major recipient of new mining capital since the early 2000’s. Though Mexico’s mining industry has traditionally been concentrated in its northern states (Gonzalez Rodriguez 2011), its arrival to the largely agricultural subsistence economies in Oaxaca has operated in tandem with other state and corporate development plans in the country’s southeastern territories. This is resulting in new socio-environmental conflicts (Lopez Barcenas 2011b) that have recently begun to be studied in environmental sociology and English-speaking academia.

Between 2002 and 2011, for example, 344 mining “concessions” (or contracts) were issued in Oaxaca, some of which will legally remain in effect until 2062 (Vélez Ascencio 2013). As a result of government approval of these mining projects especially since the highly questioned 2006 election of President Felipe Calderon, 8 percent of the nation’s territory has been opened up to mining concessions in Oaxaca alone. One of these, an active mine owned by Canadian Fortuna Silver in the Zapotec community of San Jose del Progreso, had experienced a three-month blockade in 2009 by mining opponents who claimed the community was not adequately consulted about the mine’s opening. Soon after, 800 state and federal police were sent to remove the activists, accusations of arbitrary detentions and torture followed. In 2012, four attacks by paramilitary gunmen left two leaders of the anti-mining movement dead and others
gravely wounded (Vélez Ascencio 2013). Active Canadian-owned mines in Oaxaca’s Sierra Norte (Barkin 2013, Aquino 2013) and Central Valley (Hortensia 2014) have sparked mass protests in recent years, in which anti-mine leaders have been killed or injured by paramilitary attacks (Matias 2016).

Often convinced or bribed to rent lands to extractive companies in hopes of jobs and investment, agrarian communities have turned against mining projects when their groundwater wells used for agriculture have suddenly become depleted by a mine’s intensive use of water, or when toxic contamination of rivers and soil by mining-related chemicals has led to public health crises in affected areas (Dore 2000). With so many more mining concessions scheduled to open, Oaxaca’s anti-mining movement may come to represent an emblematic case of resistance to accumulation by dispossession and environmental violence.

Importantly, most indigenous Oaxacans are not so “marginalized” that they lack all resources with which to resist. Unlike in neighboring states like Chiapas, where the indigenous population has historically suffered heavy repression and chronic landlessness, many Oaxacan municipalities are today negotiating against mines from a position of strength: the majority of land has been communally owned dating back to colonial-era land titles that grant local control over land (Eisenstadt 2011). Relinquishing these communal rights to mining companies not only threatens local health and water access, but endangers the privileged control over communal lands that Oaxacans have exercised for generations in many areas of the state. For this reason, the role and meaning
of communal lands has been a major theme in my analysis of activist interviews and in movement strategies (see Chapter III’s discussion of communal lands).

In their anthropological study of indigenous Mixtec activism in Oaxaca, Nagengast and Kearney (1990: 74) defined active (as opposed to passive) resistance as “a conscious response to the immediately experienced and directly perceived relations of exploitation and repression inscribed in the realities of everyday contemporary life.” They find that active resistance has occurred especially as the Mixtecs left their villages of birth and became incorporated into national and international capitalist political economy. Active resistance to mining requires that its subjects both perceive their resources being appropriated from them, and act in order to retain value that would otherwise be siphoned from them. The entrance of foreign-owned mines into subsistence agricultural communities implies a heightening incorporation of indigenous peoples into circuits of globalized natural resource extraction.

Oaxaca is a politicized environment where rural activists attempt to defend their mostly communal land ownership structures against encroachment. The state underwent a popular uprising in 2006 featured widespread teacher’s strikes, demonstrations, road blockades, and use of illegal state force against those perceived to be in the movement.13 This mass movement called for the resignation of governor Ulises Ruiz for corruption,

13 Many have exposed this “dirty war” in Oaxaca, while human rights NGO’s have buttressed these claims. The World Organization Against Torture documents how, towards the end of a peaceful march demanding the resignation of the governor on November 25, 2006, an attack by police and “armed groups” resulted in the death of 5 persons (whose names have not been disclosed), 141 persons detained (among them 31 women), more than 25 disappeared, over 100 injured (twenty of them with firearms), hundreds of people poisoned by tear gas and internationally prohibited substances, as well as indiscriminate unlawful entries into homes of the community of Oaxaca (OMCT 2006).
but it also came to view the governor as a symbol of authoritarian neoliberal politics that swaths of the population were rejecting. Ruiz’s persona came to be seen as the privatization of education and the criminalization of peaceful protestors who defended the educational rights of Oaxaca’s poor rural majority. These events ignited public opinion, involved some 300 organizations, and nourished an alternative grassroots governance structure for six months. Importantly, this movement also prominently featured women and indigenous activists taking over state-run media and broadcasting their stories of indignation and humiliation at the hands of authorities. Research has detailed how this mass exercise of the “gendered right to speak and be heard” helped empower Oaxaca’s poor, indigenous female majority and democratize its political culture (Stephen 2013). These experiences of Oaxaca and its Isthmus region exemplify the intersection of political, environmental and gender-based claims within the larger family of working class/indigenous/peasant anti-extraction movements of Latin America.

The Field Setting: Sociology of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec

Only 120 miles across at its narrowest point, the Isthmus of Tehuantepec represents the shortest distance between the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Ocean. It is the geographic divide between North America and Central America. The southeastern corner of Veracruz straddles the Isthmus of Tehuantepec’s northern side, while small western parts of Tabasco to the north and Chiapas to the south also form part of the Isthmus. When this dissertation refers to political organizing in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, the focus is on the “Oaxacan” Isthmus, or the Pacific/Southern side of the Isthmus where I performed my fieldwork. This region has 16 percent of Oaxaca’s
population with approximately 600,000 inhabitants (over 230,000 of which speak an indigenous language) divided into 41 municipalities.

The Istmo is 170 miles south of Oaxaca’s state capital and 450 miles south of Mexico City. It has a tropical savanna climate with rainy summers and dry winters (with an average annual temperature of about 81 degrees). Weather is hot year-round—often humid and muggy. The Isthmus economy is mostly agricultural, with much of the population employed in farming, fishing, artisanry and as small merchants. But compared with most of Oaxaca’s six other regions, the Isthmus is economically diversified, and fairly urbanized with three medium-sized cities (40 percent of Isthmenians live in cities). Other indigenous districts in Oaxaca are more politically marginalized, relatively landless and/or geographically isolated from jobs and investment, leading to their typically higher rates of migration, most famously in the Mixteca region (Instituto de los Mexicanos en el Exterior: 2005). In health, education, basic services, and housing, the Isthmus ranked above the state average (Coplade 2017).

This multi-ethnic region is numerically and politically dominated by Zapotecs, but class relations exist within and between ethnic groups. The relatively small group of Ikotts speak an entirely unique language and are concentrated in four small municipalities on the coast and lagoons. Going inland and north towards Matias Romero and beyond, Mixes would be the dominant ethnic group. To the east in the Chimalapas mountains, the territory is historically Zoque. Chontales are an ethnic group concentrated in mountain communities to the west in the Tehuantepec district. Josefa, a Zoque respondent whose interview I analyze in Chapter V, characterized the relations between Zapotecs and these
other ethnic groups as historically hierarchical. She recalls having her tone of voice mocked by Zapotecs when she was a young girl in Juchitán, and said that los *Binniza* (Zapotecs of the Isthmus) tended to view these other ethnicities as the “Indios” or the “indigenous.” This was echoed by other Zapotec respondents who reflected on the ways in which Zapotecs have acted as hegemons in the region. However, this appears to be changing as pan-indigenous ideologies are taken up by organizations in the region and as Zapotecs make efforts to relate to neighboring ethnic groups on the basis of equality due to the common threat of neoliberal megaprojects.

While the city of Tehuantepec is also associated with urban Zapotec culture, Juchitán is one of Mexico’s most famous “indigenous cities.” A plurality of Juchitecos still speak their mother tongue, with Zapotec still dominant in some of the smaller surrounding towns. Major social upheavals throughout the 1970s and 80s won Zapotec radicals the seat of power in Juchitán for brief interludes (Campbell 1994, Rubin 1997). Isthmus Zapotecs are also atypical of other indigenous groups in Mexico, both in terms of their numbers (they are third largest in population after the Nahuatl and the Maya), their notable political power, and the fact that 60 percent of them live in urban areas (SEDESOL 2007). Isthmus Zapotec women tend to enjoy more prestige and autonomy than women in most regions of Oaxaca or Mexico as a whole. However, as Chapter IV will discuss, Isthmus Zapotec gender relations are complex and contradictory (Taylor 2006).

This Istmo has long been coveted by national and global elites (Binford 1985). In the early 20th century, the building of the Trans-Isthmus railroad provided the shortest
trade route between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. At its height of operation, this was one of the busiest railways in history, carrying up to 50 trains per day. Tehuantepec boomed during this brief period up until the Panama Canal was completed in 1914. For the past two decades or more, the Mexican state and transnational companies have noted how the Istmo’s vast biodiversity offers potential for mining, oil, forestry, and wind energy, and transportation of goods (Wilson 2014). These free trade designs crisscross the whole Isthmus from gulf to gulf, but the opposition movements which I chose to highlight reside in the communities on the coastal plain (also referred to as la planicie).

As this dissertation will illustrate, many Isthmians are at best ambivalent about a mode of economic growth that has brought new social inequalities, heightened consumerism, and environmental damage over the past several decades. The municipalities I worked in have been penetrated by political parties for at least several decades. This mainstream Mexican political system has supplanted the traditional indigenous community administration of usos y costumbres which are still active in most Oaxacan indigenous communities, including several that I visited outside the Isthmus. In the place of usos y costumbres, a more Western individualist notion of citizenship has taken hold and intersects with a corrupt clientelism: widespread vote-buying, favoritism, and rupture with previous relations based on reciprocity. This is not to say that usos y costumbres is impermeable to corruption, or that “indigenous” forms of governance do not ever intermesh with official political parties. For example, San Francisco del Mar Pueblo Viejo supposedly runs on usos y costumbres, but is a local stronghold of the PRI. Indigenous territorial activists like many of my respondents see the entrance of political
parties as provoking inter-communal divisions and schisms. They are concerned that official political institutions give the government the pretext to intervene in indigenous affairs, privatize property and militarize social space.

The towns in my study sit on a historic trading route. The Pan-American Highway that connects Monterrey in Northern Mexico with Central America was completed in the late 1940s. Standing as a symbol of Mexico’s entry into the modern world-system as a more unified economy, the highway expanded the commercial sector of the Tehuantepec Isthmus, some of which is controlled by Zapotec women in small retail markets for handcrafted textiles, tropical fruits, fish and corn. The Benito Juarez damn irrigation project that completed in 1956 provided water to the region for that benefitted the livestock industry, but it also displaced other agricultural communities by accelerating the widespread sale of land (Binford 1985), sometimes literally drowning them as its largescale engineering modified the natural course of waterways. The PEMEX state oil refinery in gritty Salina Cruz, the other medium sized city west of Juchitán and Tehuantepec, is the largest in Mexico, with a daily processing capacity of over 300,000 barrels of crude oil. The plant provides many union jobs and other types of employment for the surrounding region, but has contaminated the once-pristine beaches around the city. Tens of thousands of fishermen were affected by a fire at the refinery in June 2017 that turned lagoons black and provoked acid rain.

Dams, paved roads, and electrification have contributed to raising the standard of living in the area, though the region as a whole remains impoverished by official standards: 42 percent lived in poverty while 18 percent lived in extreme poverty
(COPLADE 2010). At the same time, these infrastructure projects in the Isthmus have created inroads for powerful external interests to more easily penetrate its territories while utilizing its coastlines for export. Deforestation and water contamination reflect how these industries siphon value out of a parallel subsistence economy by overusing or destroying natural resources that small producers depend on. Irrigation and highways served to “civilize” the Isthmus into Mexico’s early 20th century nation-building project. This of course entailed the gradual loss of indigenous languages as the state socialized indigenous people into its hegemonic notion of Mestizaje. This idea that extolled Mexicans as a “mixed” race of Indian blood and Spanish language and civilization (Vasconcelos 1925) had a curious way of rendering indigenous Mexicans who still practice pre-Hispanic traditions invisible. Throughout the 1990s, as part of a wave of global indigenism, “indigenous” movements began to see the futures of indigenous peoples as inter-linked. Most famously beginning with the EZLN (Zapatistas), these trends asserted that Mexico is a pluri-cultural nation whose legal and political norms must be reformed in order to bring about a new, more reciprocal relation between indigenous people and the state (Eisenstadt 2011).

As this process of cultural renovation and identity (re)formation continues in today’s Isthmus of Tehuantepec, the more radical indigenous organizations have been calling for not only cultural recognition but political autonomy to decide for themselves the form of development that takes places in their territories. It is during this time that a new phase of modernization has been set upon the region. With Mexico’s import-substitution and state-directed model of capitalist economic growth attacked by
policymakers in Washington and Mexico City as inefficient, the economics of the early 21st century is so far looking much like Mexico’s late 19th-century opening to world capital accumulation. Liberalization of trade, advancements in agriculture, electrification, and railroads in that period jumpstarted economic booms and infrastructure. But the fact that this modernization was built on the backs of dispossessed Indians, exploited workers and cruel political repression eventually fueled the Mexican revolution of 1910. The Mexican revolution was part of a global wave of revolutions (Chase-Dunn 2017) including the Bolshevik revolution in Russia and a nationalist revolution in China, and did not truly consolidate new institutions and land reforms until the 1930s.

Much like the turn of the 20th century under the Porfiriato dictatorship, Mexico’s governments have welcomed multinational corporations for the past few decades, and some of these even appear to finance the removal and repression of Indians and dissidents, which similarly occurred under Porfirio Diaz (Bartra 2015). As such, the latest wave of commodification in the Isthmus is driven by investment (partly public, but majority private) in wind energy parks, pipelines and proposed mines that are drawing the region more closely into networks of global trade in energy and resources. Just as in previous phases of state-driven spending and modernization, some local classes benefit, even handsomely, to the extent that they align themselves with the more powerful political bosses who act as power brokers. But non-native economic giants seem to benefit the most from the Mexican state’s neoliberal, pro-business policies. The state is the actor which seeks to guarantee the safety of private investments in a terrain that is geographically as well as politically challenging to invest in.
As with the economic dependence in capitalism’s peripheral zones, where trade with foreign imperialist powers “disarticulates” Third World economies (De Janvry and Garramon 1977), unbalanced economic growth remains persistent in Mexico’s southern and southeastern states. Public programs could help mango farmers improve their yields and market their crops, as well as strengthen the economic linkages between the disparate communities of the Isthmus. But instead, national policies are geared toward making the region attractive for major companies. Firms around the world are competing for areas of competitive advantage in a world where raw materials and energy (renewable or otherwise) are experiencing speculative booms. Much like the political myth of Mestizaje legitimates state power and celebrates Mexico’s imagined historical Indian-ness while rendering modern-day Indians invisible, today’s indigenous people are approached as objects in whose name all of this investment is being justified, not as equal partners in shaping their own futures.

*The Place of Tehuantepec in Mexican History*

The Isthmus of Tehuantepec has held a turbulent position in Mexico’s history, caught between tendencies of incorporation into hegemonic authority, and rebellion against those very structures. Struggles between and among various ethnic groups in Mexico’s Tehuantepec Isthmus pre-date the modern era. After the arrival of Spanish colonists, and on into Mexican independence with the gradual incorporation of Mexico into the industrial capitalist world-system, the Isthmus was punctuated by important large-scale rebellions against foreign impositions of power.
Although it is not definitively known which ancient group they are descended from, the *Binniza* (Zapotec people) have been the largest ethnic group in the Isthmus since the middle of the 14th century. By then, the Zapotecs from the Valley of Oaxaca had occupied the ideal land and salt pans from ethnic Ikoots and Zoques. In 1496, Zapotecs led a military defense against an Aztec invasion which defeated Mexica armies from central Mexico over 7 months of fighting (Mirandé 2017). Zapotec society in Mexico’s pre-conquest period was less hierarchical and militaristic than the Aztec empire to the north. While the Spaniards arrived in Tehuantepec in 1523, the Zapotecs of the Isthmus did not actively resist Spanish colonization until 1550, the year in which Spaniards attempted major Indian land seizures and imposed heavy tributes. From then on through the 19th century, the Zapotecs of the Isthmus gained a notoriety for self-rule that was not completely unearned. Through a mix of accommodation and periodically fierce uprisings, the Zapotecs during the colonial period were able to fortify a material base of economic exchange (especially for products like fish and cloth) and maintain an intense pride in their identity which is noted by observers and extolled in local customs.

Campbell (1994) suggests that unlike in what came to be known as the more conservative city in Tehuantepec, the Zapotecs from Juchitán maintained a robust indigenous identity across social classes. Juchitán agitated for secession from Mexico during the U.S.-Mexico War as a response to how Oaxaca’s governor was then preoccupied with other matters. It was also Zapotec troops in Juchitán (famously flanked by fierce women, as oft repeated in today’s oral history) who defeated an attempted French invasion of the region in 1866. Down to the sustained political rebellions centered
around Juchitán in the 1980s and the contemporary movements for defense of natural resources and indigenous culture today, the Zapotecs of the Isthmus are rooted in a political context where surviving and defying various external regimes and armies has consolidated their reputation (and buoyant self-image) as an independent people with a glorious past. In reality, Zapotecs have a history of displacing the Istmo’s other ethnic groups and even occupying some of their lands, as the more critically aware Zapotec activists have admitted to me. This further complicates the modern academic definition of “indigenous social movements” and the application of this term to the continued “defense” of territory in the Tehuantepec Isthmus. However, evidence provided in this dissertation suggests clear inter-ethnic coordination and cooperation as groups and communities join forces to contest the latest round of globalized extraction of resources in the Isthmus.

To summarize this overview of the global context: As the contemporary world-system depends ever more heavily on dwindling supplies of cheap food, fuel, energy, and labor, this engenders greater privatization and exploitation of socially and communally managed goods. Institutional, financial and political changes in nation states, such as Mexico’s host of neoliberal economic reforms, have mainly benefited blocs of transnational resource-seeking capital. While many of the struggles over raw material extraction and the valuation of nature in the Global South take place in rural areas more likely to be populated by indigenous people and other “ethnic minority” groups, socio-environmental movements have risen to challenge the exploitation of nature as well as the threats to their economic livelihoods.
In his notion of the “double movement,” Karl Polanyi famously predicted that the total domination of “human beings and their natural environment” by markets would lead to “the demolition of society,” but that movements and states would re-embed the economy back into society. Although Polanyi seemed to mostly have Western and European countries in mind with this schema, his insights can be extended to the Global South, so long as we recognize that neoliberalism and dispossession do not spontaneously lead to organized struggles. Resistance requires consciousness, organization, and risks. We now turn to an examination of how these “micro” questions unfold on the local level. People do interpret and push back against the social and environmental hazards of today’s dominant development model, but this takes place through existing cultural channels that allow them to make sense of their world.
CHAPTER III
Beyond Frames: *Comunalidad, Guendaliza’a* and the Cultural Politics of Defending Territory

INTRODUCTION

Santo Domingo Zanatepec is a municipality on the eastern side of Oaxaca’s Isthmus region, only about 32 miles from the border with the state of Chiapas. It has a population of about 12,000 people, where ten percent speak an indigenous language. Throughout Mexico, November 20 is a date when official parades commemorate the 1920 Mexican revolution.

In 2016, Zanatepec celebrated the Mexican revolution in a most unusual way. An overwhelming portion of the population, about 5,000 people, marched through the town and onto the Panamerican Highway, stopping all traffic during the afternoon. The march was entitled “¡No a la minería, si a la vida!” (No to mining, yes to life!). It had been organized by the town’s recently formed *Unión de Ejidos y Comunidades Agrarias* (Union of Ejidos and Agrarian Communities) and by local teachers. It included people of all ages and social backgrounds, as well as a supportive speech by Zanatepec’s then-municipal president. People from smaller communities of the municipality all joined what was the largest (and actually, the first) political demonstration in the history of this agricultural and cattle-breeding town. In the heat of the afternoon sun, I joined the march and conversed with demonstrators. The march commenced in a rally in the town square. After this rally, I attended a meeting of *campesinos* at the local communal lands commission office.
Speakers at that afternoon’s march and rally included a middle school student in traditional indigenous garb who delivered a thundering poem connecting Zanatepec to its pre-Hispanic history. They declared that no people of such a proud lineage would sell their beautiful mountains and territory away to companies whose “thirst for gold will leave us without water,” as one marcher’s homemade sign read. This was Zanatepec’s massive reaction to how the Mexican federal government had approved Canadian mining corporations to explore for gold, copper and zinc on 30,000 hectares of local mountainous territory. What explains such an unprecedented outpouring in a community and region where not a single metal mine yet exists?

When the state of Oaxaca and its capital, Oaxaca City, was in the international news in 2006 as striking teachers affiliated with the APPO led a tense mobilization to demand the ouster of the state’s governor, and later in 2015 when demonstrators in the opposite corner of the state (Nochixtlán, Oaxaca) faced off in a deadly battle with state police and the army, Zanatepec and its nearby towns were mostly quiet. This is what locals like Felipe La Bastida told me. But now, there is a broad public perception in places like Zanatepec that the relative peace, health and stability that their town has enjoyed in an otherwise conflict-ridden Mexico are now at risk.

The growth of anti-mine mobilization in places like Zanatepec is remarkable not only because no damage from mining has yet occurred in this town, but also because such activism carries the danger of repression, particularly by paramilitary groups who act as private security forces for existing and planned megaprojects (Paley 2016, Morosin forthcoming). In other words, land defenders in Mexico are engaged in high-risk activism
(Loveman 1998), seeing that such activists frequently face death threats, disappearances and assassinations throughout Mexico, and Oaxaca as well.\(^\text{14}\) How did such a palpable political awakening in Zanatepec and the larger Isthmus region come to be? Why and how have old and new movement organizations coalesced to oppose the installation of mines and other economic projects?

The findings in this chapter conform with some theoretical models of social movements, but not others. Provided we understand how material conditions interact with cultural factors, we can appreciate how this threat-based mobilization has gained support, despite high levels of political repression in Oaxaca from both state and non-state actors who target activists.

The social movement literature defines “threats” very generally: threats are negative conditions that stimulate people into collective, defensive action once they become convinced that life will become worse if they don’t act (Almeida 2018: 43, 44). In his comprehensive review, Almeida (2018) identifies the most common structural threats as conditions that endanger public health/environmental quality, economic livelihoods, political rights, or repression/coercion by the state. Social movements mobilizing against the Isthmus Special Economic Zone arguably confront all four of these threats, but threats to communal well-being are not “objectively” understood most

\(^{14}\) Several respondents have communicated to me their experience of being threatened for their activism. Alejandro of the Grupo Ecologista Zanatepec recounted being regularly followed by a white van back in 2015 when mining company representatives were attempting to negotiate with villagers to acquire permits in Zanatepec. After initially meeting with these representatives, claiming he did not know they were connected to a mining company, Alejandro refused to stop his activism and rejected their offers for further meetings. See Appendix V for a photo of a threat received by Alejandro via text message which he and I both attributed to his public anti-mine advocacy. This threatening message was sent right before the November 20 mega-march against mines which he was involved in.
of the time by communities adjacent to resource extraction projects. Organizers in this region have been able to connect the SEZ with a development policy that provokes “quotidian disruptions” in people’s daily subsistence patterns (Snow et al 1998).

Consistent with the “framing” perspective in sociology (e.g. Snow and Benford 1988), threats only lead to mobilization when organizations construct them in such a way as to appeal to broadly held values as well as material interests. In the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, the way that villagers are being “informed” about the Special Economic Zone and new mining projects is in line with local ethnic cultures, but also reflects the desired strategic alliances of political activists between older human rights groups, fishermen, campesinos, students and environmentalists. The fact that groups of local and national activists are intervening to raise environmental and territorial claims before any mines have begun active construction is also somewhat unique, and inspiring, from a political standpoint. This kind of preventive action enables communities to “make meaningful changes or stop development” while a project is still in the planning phases (Kojola 2018).

Below I review some foundational theories of social movements. This is followed by thick ethnographic description of several movement encounters and some testimonies from interview respondents. I integrate this data into an analysis of how anti-mine organizations construct who will be affected by, and who is to blame for, the recent influx of foreign investment in mining exploration, and by the Special Economic Zone itself. I describe how multiple threats are constructed as movement groups adapt local cultural forms such as public dialogue forums to build resistance.
THEORETICAL OVERVIEW: COMUNALIDAD, STRATEGIC FRAMING, AND OPPOSITIONAL COMMUNITIES

Social movement scholars vary in terms of how they understand the inter-relationships between culture, social structure, and social movements, particularly as it relates to the development of consciousness, demands, and strategies. Snow and Benford (1988) famously describe the “core framing tasks” of social movement organizations (SMOs) as the ability to assign blame for a problem and devise a solution, and to do so in ways that resonate with broadly held cultural values and beliefs. Other scholars emphasize how pre-existing cultural traditions (Hart 1996), social structures of domination (Morris and Braine 2001), and legacies of past struggles all stimulate social movement activism while shaping its forms. More recent research situates movements as central to broader cultural change. David Snow, Anna Tan, and Peter Owens (2013: 225) contend that the framing processes inherent in all movements “contribute to the alteration and reaffirmation of culture.” This chapter combines several of these approaches, while also introducing some indigenous analytical categories.

To better account for the social and political structures shaping the mobilization against corporate and state-sponsored megaprojects in the Tehuantepec Isthmus, I draw upon the Oaxacan idea of “comunalidad” (literally, “communality”), which refers to a coherent set of material and symbolic relationships still extant in many agrarian and indigenous communities (Manzo 2011, Luna 2010). The concept of comunalidad was originally and quintessentially applied to the Zapotec and Mixe (ayuujk) ethnic groups of Oaxaca’s Sierra Norte region by anthropologists originating from there (e.g. Luna 2010;
Díaz, Hernández, and Jiménez 2007, Gómez 2001). It has also been called an “indigenous analytical theory” and a “neo-indigenist current” (Acosta 2014: 15).

In addition to a communitarian ethic, *comunalidad* is a mode of relating to nature, and set of agricultural practices, which permits renovation and conservation of natural resources (Monroy Acosta 2014: 8). Caring for the natural environment (rather than appropriating natural resources for endless growth) forms a component part of this worldview and its praxis of environmental justice. At the same time, *comunalidad* is not an exclusive quality of Oaxaca’s Sierra Norte region, nor solely of indigenous peoples: “It is also present in rural non-indigenous communities that are governed by reciprocity…and that hold land communally. What distinguishes indigenous people from these other communities is their ethno-cultural elements: language, a pre-hispanic cosmovision and associated rituals, and the use of distinctive dress, among others” (Maldonado 2003).

Just as the ethnic Mixe (*ayuujk*) people of Oaxaca use the term *Wejën Kajën* (Monroy Acosta 2014, Vásquez 2008), Zapotecs of the Isthmus speak of *Guendaliza’a*, meaning “obligations to one’s relationships” (Altamirano-Jiménez 2013: 196). It is used to characterize the forms of reciprocity that structure the organization of communities like Ixtépec. Its material factors include a smallholder mode of production based on collective land rights. Its symbolic elements implicate all members of a community (not just *campesinos*) and reflect the expectation of mutual aid and gift-giving among social and kinship networks. In this way, I would argue that *comunalidad/ Guendaliza’a* denote
a shared way of life that is broader than any particular ideology or collective action frame.\footnote{One of the few English-speaking sociologists to use the term “communality” has been Kai Erickson in his classic, functionalist study on how a catastrophic 1972 flood disrupted the moral order of Logan County, West Virginia (Erickson 1976). There, he characterizes communality as a kind of 
s\textit{gemeinschaft}, as a “network of relationships that make up the general human surround” (187) and “a state of mind shared among a particular gathering of people” (189). Erickson deploys this term to denote how the obligations that one feels to their surrounding community resemble their attachment to immediate family.}

Indigenous SMOs of the Tehuantepec Isthmus frame their struggle as the defense, maintenance, and revindicati\textsuperscript{on of a way of life. The content of their collective action frames is influenced by activists’ own interpretations of \textit{comunalidad}/ Guendaliza’a. These frames cohere the grievance construction, coalition-building, and repertoires of action that in turn reinforce an oppositional culture (Morris and Braine 2001). In order to support this claim, I offer a critical review of Western political sociology.

As social movement theorizing moved away from structural determinism toward more interpretive and constructionist approaches, the now voluminous “framing” literature began to focus on how movements “simplify and condense” reality in order to make their grievances, goals and strategies intelligible and attractive (Snow and Benford 1992). Framing theory explains how movement organizers generate “action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate the activities and campaigns of a social movement organization (SMO)” (Benford and Snow 2000: 614). I extend this approach by interrogating the mutual association between structure and culture. This serves to explain both how frames are formed and selected in the first place (Fiss and Hirsch 2005), and also why recruits come to be convinced by “a particular version of
reality” (Benford 1997: 412) that SMOs are proffering. By performing historically informed ethnographies of how people join “relatively autonomous grass-roots movements as [these movements] first begin to organize” (ibid 422), we can locate how a shared culture of opposition spurs action.

Other theories of cultural solidarity within movements, by contrast, treat culture in a manner that seems overly diffuse as well as voluntarist. Rick Fantasia’s classic work Cultures of Solidarity (1988) postulates that class consciousness can swiftly spring out of workplace struggles. In response, Stephen Hart (1996: 6) notes that “the communal discourse Fantasia describes can emerge suddenly only because it was already part of a repertoire of cultural possibilities.” Similar to Hart (1996: 89), I approach culture as a collective, public structure of received codes which movements can make use of, and as “an extension and crystallization of ordinary life.”

According to Aldon Morris and Naomi Braine (2001: 21), the “quintessentially cultural task” of organizing collective action is “heavily determined by the position of the group being mobilized in existing structures of domination and subordination.” They define “oppositional communities” as groups whose identities have “a subordinate meaning in the social system” and whose position was forged by macro-structures of domination (Morris and Braine 2001: 21). Writing from this same perspective, Jane Mansbridge (2001: 7) claims that when marginalized groups positively identify with their subordinated identity, and when they’ve experienced “a history of segregation with some autonomy,” they are more able and motivated to contest their subordination. This argument can be paired with that of scholars who explain peasant rebellions by
emphasizing the importance of secluded, communal villages where landowning peasants have “internal leverage” (Wolfe 1999: 291) over government authorities.

As Charles Tilly (1979) argues, activists’ choice of tactics is often shaped by the “tactical repertoire” that is developed over time through prior social struggles. In the Isthmus, peasant and indigenous struggles over land are longstanding, and are commonly associated with the Mexican revolution. They also encompass the living memory of violent land struggles against large landowners (both Zapotec and Mestizo). Isthmus Zapotecs figured prominently in the moderately successful redistribution of these large estates to campesinos in the 1970s and 80s through the COCEI movement (Coalition of Workers, Peasants, and Students of the Isthmus) (Rubin 1994), which I touch upon in this chapter.

In addition, Isthmenians have a shared history of semi-segregation, exclusion, and ethnic/class mobilization against the Mexican state. Their experiences and memories of resistance, and the distinctive communalism of the villages and territories in this majority-indigenous region (Manzo 2008), have made possible what sociologists might call a set of “empowering beliefs and behaviors” (Morris 1992: 363) that have become part of their quotidian lifeworld. The collective action frames used by anti-mining activists in today’s Isthmus draws upon these elements of oppositional culture to bring forward an oppositional consciousness—a state of mind which rouses a population to confront and change the historic subjugation they have faced. At the same time, this movement is not necessarily “pre-figurative” (Leach 2013) because its participants are not attempting to create “experimental or alternative social arrangements” that will
replace those of the existing society (Yates 2014). The way of life its members claim to want is precisely the one they’re practicing now and have always practiced, only without megaprojects that threaten the dispossession of their lands.

The analytical relevance of oppositional cultures, shared histories and historically determined repertoires of protest in this case underscore the influence of social relationships on framing and movement organizing (Ryan and Gamson 2009). The concept of “frame amplification” revolves around the assumption that “individuals subscribe to a range of values” (Snow et al 1986: 469, emphasis added) to which SMOs attempt to cater. But the cultural life of indigenous people in Mesoamerica is distinct from that of the prevailing national culture, and also wider than individual values. Here, values are more collective, and materially rooted in a way of life that is shaped by structures of domination.

At a time when large agro-export and energy/mineral projects threaten oppressed ethnic minorities with expropriation and/or assimilation, the cultural basis of framing processes are particularly salient for groups that are increasingly calling the ethnocentric character of nation-states into question by demanding recognition. Applying his study of the modern Mexican state to other contexts, Rodolfo Stavenhagen (1983:11) argued:

The ideology of national culture has produced, on many occasions, the subordination of and discrimination against ethnic minority groups and the denial of their cultural rights (and frequently also their most basic human rights). Many countries have adopted policies of forced assimilation...in the name of the ideology of national culture...Customs and traditions that form part of the cultural heritage of subordinate ethnic groups are forbidden...Their history is condemned to oblivion and their identity is denied in a thousand ways.
The deregulation of Mexico’s mining sector particularly concentrates the ways in which indigenous groups’ access to land and water has been imperiled by international trade legislation that favors mining companies. It also suggests the ethnocentric character of nation states that has long subjugated “minority” ethnic groups. Frames and framing operate in different ways with different outcomes among cultures who underwent forced assimilation, as opposed to groups who more strongly identify with what Stavenhagen calls “the ideology of the national culture.” For example, according to one leading Oaxacan anthropologist, the different communities who make up an ethnic “pueblo” are united by common “language, territorial extensions, and awareness of collective identities” (Maldonado 2010: 12).

For movement organizers in Oaxaca’s Isthmus who insist on cultural equality and territorial autonomy, recruiting participants is not merely a question of “successfully exploiting and elaborating…a master frame to its fullest” (Snow et al 1986: 476). Instead, organizers acknowledge and creatively adapt the material relations of collective cooperation and their accompanying symbolic constructs that have continued to make life mutually possible for Isthmenians. They organize through this pre-existing cultural structure of *comunalidad*, which lends itself to certain frames and repertoires over others. In this way, the findings of this case study can extend to social movements and contentious politics throughout (as well as beyond) Latin America and the Global South.

In their study of mobilizations among one of India’s marginalized tribes, Chakravarty and Chaudhuri (2012: 3) make a related point about how the reciprocity and solidarity between tribe members provides a basis for individuals to join or reject certain
social movements: “Lived experiences of the material world generate interpretive schemata through which individuals understand and make sense of their social existence. As a form of knowledge, this is distinct from either traditional belief systems or well-developed social or political ideologies.” Comunalidad can thus be thought of as more general than collective action frames. Its customs and forms of knowledge help maintain group cohesion in the face of the commodifying, individualizing aspects of contemporary globalization.

In a similar way, Guendaliza’a is an internal normative system that acts as an ideology of harmony, resulting in the fortification of reciprocal practices and economic interactions. Its downplaying of class differences fortifies reciprocal practices and economic interactions. Though direct use of this term and these attendant practices have waned among the broad population, the Isthmus Zapotecos who talk about Guendaliza’a today are primarily those who are involved in (or supportive of) socio-environmental activism against the neoliberal government. This was explained to me by a teacher who has spent a decade participating in Isthmus movements and who recently gained his Masters degree studying themes of comunalidad.

At the same time, political and cultural organizing performed by these movements can also contribute to cultural continuity among oppositional cultures by accentuating how their collective identity and values differ from those of the state and the dominant groups who have privileged access to this state. This point builds on and modifies some previous arguments of both cultural sociologists and movement theorists. While it is accurate that some social movements act as “salient sociocultural agents” whose framing
work helps revitalize earlier cultures from the “distant or proximate” past (Snow et al 2013: 239), today’s rural and indigenous movements also see themselves as protecting their present-day modes of living during a time of great flux. The case of ethno-political mobilization in Oaxaca can serve as just one salient example.

**CULTURAL SURVIVAL AND COMMUNAL LANDS—A MATTER OF “LIFE” AND DEATH**

In this section, I integrate quotes from interviews with field notes from several mass meetings at an early stage of the anti-mine and anti-SEZ movement. I use these data to analyze how the movement’s formation of grievances, coalitions, and repertoires has been aided by, and further elaborates, a pre-existing indigenous culture of opposition rooted in collective land tenure and in local customs of social reciprocity.

Organizations involved in the defense of Isthmus territory today are adapting local cosmovisions and practices to defy global capitalism’s drive for minerals and raw materials. For example, in rallying campesinos, fishermen, and small-scale ranchers, the movement also strongly echoes the legacy of the agrarian reforms of the Mexican revolution. These social forms of land tenure are still prominent today in Oaxaca, much to the inconvenience of investors who must gain permission from land owners before initiating a project. Framing mining and other projects as a threat to communal land tenure serves to unleash campesinos as central actors in the anti-mining movement with both the legal power and the moral duty to prevent the destruction of lands and communities. I demonstrate this by analyzing testimonies of some main participants. I include brief biographical information that shows the social position and political
trajectories of these activists, and triangulate this information with field notes from activist gatherings.

Who Is Affected? Identifying Threats To Social Property

Alejandro Cruz Velasquez is a Zapotec native of Zanatepec, a 1970s student activist in Mexico City of campesino background. He founded the Grupo Ecologista Zanatepec (hereafter “GEZ”), which he has directed since 2011. The GEZ had been involved in river cleanup and other local environmentalist work such as planting trees with youth and giving workshops in schools. They came to perceive, and later discovered for a fact, that their river and whole town could be endangered by a mining project on which no municipal authority had ever sought the consent of Zanatepec.

“In the year 2011, a helicopter with probes suddenly appeared. It was carrying a plate which is what did the study. It went throughout the sierra, looping around all the mountains, and we realized that it was exploring for minerals. But we didn’t have any other information” (Interview with Alejandro Cruz Velasquez).

As Escalón Portilla and González Gaudiano (2017) demonstrate, the pedagogy of the Preparatoria José Martí community high school in Ixhuatán joins with contemporary struggles for rights and land in the region. While still a high school student at the Prepa José Martí, Silvino Velasquez Matus was part of Colectivo Utopia, a group of students

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16 Preparatoria José Martí is subject to the same regulations of Mexico’s public schools, but receives no state funding due to its legal designation as a Preparatoria Federal por Cooperación. Therefore, its funding is derived from nominal fees paid by parents and also by external donations raised by teachers. The school’s primary pedagogical and political objectives consist in “training and accompanying youth, their groups and initiatives with tools and knowledge that permit them better conditions of life in the community with regards to employment, health and education” (Escalón Portilla and González Gaudiano 2017: 12). The authors quoted this statement from the school’s website (see more at https://prepajosemarti.jimdo.com/nosotros/), which I then translated.
who used theater, radio and the written word to participate in political organizing directly through the unique space of reflection, study and praxis created by their school (la Prepa). This youth collective was involved in picking up plastic and trash from the Ostuta River, just like the GEZ upstream in Zanatepec. When the school’s Director Manuel Antonio Ruiz discovered mining concessions just north of Zanatepec in 2014 by digging on the Ministry of Economy’s website, he asked his students to research the impact it could have on their river if the company began exploiting the mountains for minerals. Teachers and students from the José Martí Community High School in Ixhuatán later invited GEZ members to a radio workshop with Ojo de Agua.

“We decided to contact GEZ, to give them a conference here in the Prepa. They came with the idea to tell us about their own work in Zanatepec, but when they finished their presentation, we the youth told them about the mining contracts above Zanatepec. We began to work locally and separately, and at times we came together for conferences and talks…” (Interview with Silvino Velasquez Matus).

This is how a new generation of high school student and teacher activists informed a local environmental group of older men that their river and lands were in for much more contamination than litter. A partnership was formed between the groups in order to create and share this information among everyday residents. Alejandro’s first preoccupation was that a mining project would devastate the mountains that overlook Zanatepec. He confronted and questioned Zanatepec’s incoming 2014 president with proof that mining permits had been issued in areas that border Zanatepec. Alejandro said the president showed little interest in investigating the mining project further or taking
action against it. The local elected leader was unable to answer the environmentalist’s questions about how these projects were approved, when, by which agency, who owns them, and what their effects might be.

The response of the GEZ, aside from continuing its presentations in schools and its work among youth on river clean-up, was to embark on a campaign of radio forums, neighborhoods film projections, flier distribution, and any manner of outreach to residents to alert them to the reality of the mining project. “We began to develop informational work of raising consciousness (conscientización)…We went out very broadly to talk to people about the problems in the community. The work was expansive and very heavy” (Interview with Alejandro Cruz Velasquez).

Felipe La Bastida is a storeowner in Zanatepec who has lived in the town since 1992. Before that, he had studied philosophy and theology at the Regional Seminary of the Southeast in Tehuacán, Puebla. His mother was ethnically Chontal and his father was a Zapotec from the Valley of Oaxaca. Felipe was sent to Zanatepec by the Bishop of Tehuantepec (Don Arturo Lona) where he was supporting UCIRI, an Isthmus coffee cooperative. Shortly after, upon deciding against becoming a priest, he left the church on amiable terms. He remains Catholic, and has been involved with CECASI in Zanatepec for years. His activism now revolves around the anti-mining cause: “When we began this process, we knew we had to do it for ourselves, the families, the pueblos, and the land” (Interview with Felipe La Bastida).

Felipe’s testimony sounded similar to what Alejandro from the GEZ related about the origins of the anti-mine movement in Zanatepec. Felipe added that the movement
sought out a local mango farmer with extensive experience in anti-mining and human rights work, Roberto Gamboa. Gamboa’s anti-mining work is not carried out from within an environmental group, a church, or a community radio station, but rather from the agrarian sector. Originally from a working class family in Mexico City, Gamboa became a mango farmer when he moved to Zanatepec from the state of Guerrero. He has been a comunero since 2012, with a legal right to vote in the assembly. He had prior experience as a member of REMA (the National Network of Mexicans Affected by Mining), and had helped to create documentaries about the impacts of mining in Central America and Guerrero, before moving to Zanatepec. Eventually, he became elected President of Zanatepec’s coalition of agrarian groups.

The way that he explained it, Gamboa’s entry into the Isthmus movement was coincidental. He was previously living near Carrizalillo, Guerrero, a mining region, where he had been involved in anti-mining and human rights work to assist ejidatarios. Life became unsustainable due to a combination of pollution, narcotrafficking, and violent threats against anti-mine activists. He opted to move to Zanatepec for his wife, who is from a nearby community. Thinking that he had found refuge from the social hazards of mega-mining, Gamboa soon learned that Canadian companies owned mining permits quite nearby, to the north in San Miguel Chimalapa and to the east by Tapanatepec. When Felipe, GEZ and Radio Guluchi decided to distribute materials opposing the mines throughout Zanatepec’s colonias and agencias municipales (neighborhoods and outlying communities), Gamboa channeled support via REMA,
which produces and distributes fliers and digital manuals aimed at supporting communities affected by Mexico’s rapidly expanding mining industry.

As previously mentioned, the Istmo’s relations of production must be considered when viewing the confluence of actors willing to oppose mining. While heavy petrochemical industry is concentrated in the West in Salina Cruz, the eastern Isthmus of Tehuantepec has earned the title of “Oaxaca’s mango capital,” due to its status as one of Mexico’s largest exporters of mangoes (Fresh Plaza 2016). Zanatepec is one of several major mango-producing municipalities of the Isthmus. In this way, export agriculture exists alongside capital-intensive resource extraction.

Roberto Gamboa’s anti-mining work is carried out from within the agrarian sector. Gamboa argues that without the permission of the agrarian sector (ejidatarios and comuneros), mining companies will not have the legal right to begin exploration and extraction. Hence, the task is to unite all campesinos and ganaderos (livestock farmers) into an anti-mining bloc who can act as stewards of communal land by closing it off to any mining activity:

> Look, with mines, the minerals belong to the nation. They’re administered by the government, which gives the companies a permit, right? But the mineral is underneath the ground. The owners of the territory are comuneros and ejidatarios [communal farmers]. To extract this mineral, the companies need legal permission, so the government gives a contract so that the nation’s property [the minerals] can be extracted. But the land is not property of the nation; it’s property of los pueblos [‘the people’, usually rural and/or indigenous]. The government’s goal is that the social property in land gets privatized little by little… [Interview with Roberto Gamboa].

Gamboa’s strategic perspective is reiterated by some specialists in agrarian and indigenous rights. Francisco Lopez Barcenas, a Oaxacan historian and legal advisor to
anti-mining movements throughout Mexico, details how the Mexican nation-state has the authority to grant use of its land and waters to private owners as well as social owners (e.g. ejidatarios), but land cannot be expropriated from the latter without the permission of the assembly of farmers who hold titles to that land (Barcenas 2017).

In 2010, just over half of all property in Mexico is “social property,” comprised of ejidos and comunidades agrarias. Ejidos represent 42.9 percent of national land area held by 3,844,601 beneficiaries, while comunidades represent 8.7 percent of national area held by 608,367 beneficiaries. Additionally, 37 percent of Mexican land is held privately and 11 percent is classified as public property (Barcenas 2017). Ejido property has its origins in the political demands of the peasantry during the 1910 Mexican Revolution. Ejidos are farms that the government expropriated large landholders and awarded them campesinos (peasants) who had fought for land reforms in the Revolution. Communal land predates the Mexican Revolution and dates back to indigenous people’s pre-Columbian territorial claims. “Comunidades” are lands the Spanish king granted back to indigenous communities after the Conquest. Indigenous communities today tend to be concentrated in comunidades, whose common lands are also referred to as their bienes comunales (communal property).

Typically, a campesino has usufruct rights to an individual plot of land within his ejido, and a general assembly with governance responsibilities is elected by the ejido’s members every several years. Ejidal lands are still basically state lands “rented” to campesinos, but communal lands are owned and managed by pueblos themselves, according to Gamboa (pueblos in Spanish refers both to the villages and their people.
themselves). Communal lands give indigenous communities a greater degree of legal autonomy than ejidos, which is why they pose political barriers to government-backed development projects (Payan and Correa-Cabrera 2014). Communal lands are targeted for privatization by the hegemonic project of global capitalism. The Mexican government and US military argue that communally managed lands harbor illegal activity and provide base areas for potential insurgencies (Bryan and Wood 2015).

Geographical distribution of ejidos and communal lands (the latter referred to as comunidades agrarias) varies widely within Mexico’s states and regions. Oaxaca is unique for having a much larger portion of social property than the national average, and also for the vast majority of that terrain (78 percent of Oaxaca’s land) being held by comunidades agrarias as common lands, rather than by ejidos (Barcenas 2017). The juridical status of much of the agrarian property in the Isthmus where I performed my fieldwork is communal, but with variation. Zanatepec has both ejidos and communal lands, while Ixtepec’s farming and grazing lands are all communally owned and managed. A total of 126 Ejidos and comunidades agrarias exist in the Isthmus by government estimates. Tropical cash crops like mango and watermelon have gradually displaced the cultivation of maize, and land disputes have arisen especially since the 1960s against middlemen who buy from, and lend to, local small producers (Instituto Nacional de los Pueblos Indígenas: 2017).

Government policies since the 1970s began a complex process of privatization and liberalization, which by 1992 had culminated in the reform of Constitution Article 27 in order to coincide with the North American Free Trade Agreement. While immediately
affecting about 50 percent of Mexico’s national territory, this constitutional reform “ends the government’s obligation to redistribute land to the landless and permits (but does not require) the privatization of land in non-alienable corporate status as *ejido* or communal land” (Stephen 1997: 77). This set the context for today’s mining-related conflicts and for other political struggles over development and infrastructure throughout the Mexican countryside. Mining companies and their representatives attempt to gain exploration rights over these vast territories by approaching *ejidatarios* and *comuneros* throughout Mexico with a mixture of bribes, incomplete information about risks, and outright threats. However, it is only through the intervention of grassroots organizers with links to national networks that a plurality of social sectors (especially agrarian groups) come to see mining as invasive rather than benign, and become involved in the formal defense of territory.

Gamboa’s friend, Daniel García Toledo, is President of Ejido Rio Manzo in Zanatepec, which he calls a small ejido due to its 26 members. Part of the ejido’s 180 hectares are included in the area that mining corporations were exploring. Toledo began researching the issue of permissions and concessions for megaprojects while he worked for a sustainable development organization of campesinos called UMAFOR-Istmo Pacifico. As he explains,

In this organization, we saw that communities were seeking advice about the invasion of so many wind parks and mines in the region. In no case did the government ever bring itself to ask an ejido or *bien communal* whether we wanted this kind of investment.

He recalls how a mass assembly of campesinos was held in Zanatepec on September 13, 2014 in which a resounding “NO” to open-pit mining in the Isthmus was elaborated into
a declaration, which was distributed along with other anti-mining fliers, infosheets, and documentaries to nearby towns and communities. UMAFOR recently named Toledo as a delegate. In fall of 2017 just prior to our interview, Toledo helped organize another assembly in San Pedro Tapanatepec, the neighboring municipality where a mining corporation was in the initial stages of gold and silver exploration. Toledo reports that:

> It was attended by about 15 comisariados (elected presidents of communal land associations), three recently elected municipal presidents, and more than 400 people, in which the majority said they would not permit the entrance of las mineras, because they don’t bring anything positive to our communities (Interview with Daniel Toledo).

This risk to campesinos and rural communities as a whole from mining and other megaprojects eventually led multiple agrarian organizations to merge into larger groups with elected leadership. In Zanatepec, Gamboa had recently been elected President of the newly formed Union of Ejidos, which collectively represents 7 local ejidos and one bien communal in Zanatepec. Unions of other agrarian organizations have also formed in numerous other communities on this (eastern) side of the Isthmus. According to Toledo,

> It’s the first time ever here that we’re building Unions of Ejidos, that ejidos are organizing to defend their territories. What we’ve seen is that for example those from Chimalapas, Tapanatepec, Zanatepec, Ixhuatán, Reforma de Pineda, Niltepec, and Chahuítes are informed, which brings us much joy (Interview with Daniel Toledo).

These testimonies attest to how environmental groups and agrarian organizations have gotten organized rather quickly as activists have informed them about how incoming mining projects jeopardize hard-won collective land rights. Identifying the Special Economic Zone as a potential threat to campesinos in a region that
values its collective lands and is also a major exporter of mangoes to the United States serves to build a base of opposition within the agrarian sector.

_Campesino_ activists like Gamboa and Toledo continue to focus on strengthening collective land ownership against forces of privatization and dispossession by encouraging _ejidos_ to vote on writing anti-mining ordinances into their communal statutes. This process entails a kind of bureaucratic back-and-forth between the local _ejido’s_ members and the National Agrarian Registry, which activists claim is essentially more in favor of mining contracts than defending small agricultural producers.

In a region whose economic diversification and social differentiation is greater than other indigenous contexts in Mexico, whose _campesinos_ are aging or immigrating and whose economy is globalizing, the agrarian and indigenous ethic that motivates opposition to neoliberalism and to extractive capital needs to be translated in ways that allow a diversity of people besides _campesinos_ to join. It is here that some differences in strategy, framing and discourse exist among activists. Toledo estimates that the bulk of _ejidos_ oppose mining, but that much work still remains to be done to organize the broader population of Zanatepec and the region: “We are also in talks with other organizations that are not _ejidatarios_ or _comuneros_, so we also want to bring them the corresponding information.”

Daniel Cirilo of the Grupo Ecologista Zanatepec is one of the respondents who see the need for doing outreach beyond _campesinos_, and for making links with other political movements. He identifies personally the same way as he describes his town: as Zoque-Zapoteco—“a mix of cultures,” though he doesn’t speak either indigenous
language. He lives in Zanatepec where he gains occasional income as a day laborer in the fields, and he also travels to Veracruz as an informal seller of cosmetic products. He has participated in the GEZ since about 2016, but also has prior activist experiences such as being on a national caravan from Chiapas to Mexico City that opposed mining in Mexico and that demanded justice in the case of the state of Guerrero’s 43 disappeared teaching students.\textsuperscript{17} He formed a neighborhood committee in Colonia Carlos Sanchez where he lives. The committee’s work includes “informing the people about defensive movements…It was the first neighborhood that installed a wall painting (pinta de bardas), which was later demolished by the city. With donated paint and some money to pay an artist, we want to paint ‘no to the mine’ on an elevated water tank, and ‘no to the special economic zones’ on the other side. We know we’re being monitored by helicopter.”

Though Cirilo had many concerns over the gradual disenfranchisement of Mexico’s peasantry by “free trade” reforms, he doesn’t agree that the anti-mine movement should focus all energies on organizing the agrarian sector. He claims that the companies don’t need the permission of “these 7 little ejidos” to expropriate the land. For this reason, Cirilo favors building “un movimiento civil,” by which he means a social movement of the broad population, including taxi drivers, housewives, and people of various occupations.

\textsuperscript{17} By the time of my second research trip, Cirilo was still affiliated with the GEZ, but he had distanced himself from them and was now spending more time working with the APIIDTT (People’s Assembly of the Isthmus in Defense of Land and Territory), for reasons that are beyond the scope of this research.
Many anti-mine activists (including Cirilo) discuss their lived connections with their territory and community in terms of a non-predatory relation with nature. Elderly members frequently commemorate how the natural environment supplemented social reproduction and gave community members a lifelong identity which now stimulates them to assume political roles as a voice for socio-environmental justice. Movement participants marshal and re-tell their personal memories of interacting with nature as they organize to oppose any mining or other extractive activity that symbolizes what would be the end the community’s ability to live sustainably, particularly in regards to the customary use of bodies of water (aquifers, rivers, lagoons and the sea). This can be observed in the way that Alejandro of the Grupo Ecologista Zanatepec describes his early memories with the Ostuta River and the origins of his nickname. When I asked what shaped his identity into that of an environmentalist, he answered:

I was born on a ranch. Our origin is 100 percent campesino, and we have a sentimental relation with nature. The river would flow 20 meters from the ranch. Every day, we would live off of nature. We would eat from the fields and the river. We created a dependency, a spiritual relation with nature. And later, with the passing of time, this made me observe that form of life and that nature, which I wasn’t conscious of during my childhood. We learned that nature was being harmed. It wasn’t being looked after.

My family was large. Every day we depended on the land and the river. I personally feel a profound sense of veneration for the river because it fed me and my siblings. My nickname is Pescador (fisherman). For me this is an honor because it suggests my contribution to the household. I would catch fish from the river and bring them home, daily, so that we could all eat. And when there was some left over, I would put it on a plate and sell whatever could be sold to the neighborhood. And so even when I later left the pueblo to study in Mexico City, I brought with me this sense that things in nature are being disturbed” (Interview with Alejandro Cruz Velasquez).
This testimony echoes Tischler and Navarro’s (2011) argument that agrarian communities in Southern Mexico maintain a “non-predatory” relation with their territories and communal goods, while “reaffirming their ties to nature and defending life” (68). In related ways, coalitions of activist groups in the Istmo integrate their personal memories of community, and of environmental (in)justice, into their collective action frames.

In sum, identifying the Special Economic Zone as a potential threat to campesino families in a region that values its collective forms of landownership and bodies of water serves to build a base of opposition among agrarian communities and small towns who reside downstream from rivers like the Rio Ostuta. This river flows through communities like Ixhuatán and Zanatepec, and its waters would likely be diverted and polluted to support water-intensive mining activity that is currently being planned by mining companies in partnership with the Mexican state. And, surely, the south-western edge of the Isthmus stands to lose its major competitive advantage as a mango producer at some point if it becomes a mining region. But beyond these agrarian demands, the movement for defense of territory also appeals to multiple strands of ethnic identity and class. It assigns blame to the federal government for sacrificing local ecology to further its alliance with foreign capitalists. Villagers already had grievances against ruling elites for neglecting their needs to fish and farm for many years. Based on a legacy of reverence for the natural environment that
clashes with government plans to “develop” the Isthmus into a regional center of accumulation, they have supported and joined the defense of territory.

Who Is To Blame? Calls To Action Pit Elites Against Smallholder Lifestyles

The following examples demonstrate how threats to group interests and values are constructed and disseminated through mass meetings akin to what student activists in the U.S. once called “teach-ins.” Notably, villagers from a more marginalized ethnic status are being recruited to a movement in which Zapotecs are the clear majority due to their large population. In past decades, the region’s largest social movements heavily emphasized claims to Zapotec culture and identity—the Zapotecs tended to view the neighboring Zoques and Ikoots pejoratively as “indios,” and they treated any non-Zapotecs as “outsiders” (Altamirano-Jiménez 2013: 195).

In the late 1970s, the COCEI began with a Zapotec nationalist stance but soon surpassed those limits (Giebeler 1997: 136). By contrast, APOYO has, since its inception, couched its political appeals and programmatic declarations in terms of the rights of indigenous people everywhere to have their land and customs respected. But like the old COCEI, today’s organizers also speak in the name of peasants and the poor.

The appeals put forth in movement gatherings visibly resonate with meeting attendees who raise comments and questions in support of the movement’s goals. Framing the issue in both class and ethnic terms helps widen the appeal to different indigenous ethnic groups who share some common desire to manage protect social reproduction, based on their common vulnerability to neoliberal megaprojects. At the same time, valorizing peasant lifestyles to an audience of aging smallholders helps to
establish APOYO’s continuity with successful land struggles dating back to a time in which the Isthmus was less urbanized and had a stronger campesino identity.

In late October of 2016, four young men from APOYO had leveraged their connections to the community of San Francisco del Mar Pueblo Viejo (population 885), based wholly on fishing, which lies directly on the edge of a lagoon. APOYO held an informational meeting there with an audience of 50 people (adults were all male, plus 10 male and 15 female high school students). Referred to by locals as “Pueblo Viejo,” the village is about an hour’s ride in the back of a pick-up truck from the Prepa José Martí high school in Ixhuatán. Its people reject the Zapotec-derived label of “Huave” and refer to themselves in their own language as Ikoots. The Ikoots inhabit four municipalities on the coast whose minute size and remoteness from cities lends itself to an internal cohesion that, when triggered by outside threats, has resulted in its fishermen taking militant actions against a wind energy project (Dunlap 2018b) and creating a peaceful blockade that forced the Mexican army to retreat (Avila Calero 2017) in recent years.

The topic of the meeting was the Special Economic Zones, which few people at the meeting had ever heard of. We gathered under a fishing canopy. As strong hot winds blew loudly, high school youth set up a digital projector to play clips from a documentary (Hija de la Laguna) about an anti-mining movement in Peru’s Cajamarca region.

Manuel, Director of the José Martí school, opened the meeting by appealing to indigenous and peasants’ rights: “We live in difficult times. Defenders of their rivers and

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18 When I asked Daniel Cirilo what might account for the lack of women, he seemed to say this was just tradition in Pueblo Viejo, with participation being “puros hombres.” Fishing, like farming, is overwhelmingly men’s labor.
lands have been killed throughout our nation. The government is planning a Special Economic Zone on our lands. This will directly impact our lives, mostly in indigenous areas.”

Another main speaker from Centro de Derecho Humanos- Tepeyac, a human rights NGO based three hours away in Tehuantepec, framed the Special Economic Zone in class terms, while defining it as a danger to resource sovereignty and public health:

National capitalists want to liberalize the Port of Salina Cruz for export, and international capitalists want the region’s raw materials. Power companies are paying families 8 pesos per square meter of land to install power transmission lines. The number of wind turbines will double. Then there’s mining, the most damaging project of all. The local Ostuta River is in danger, since a dam is being proposed there in order to generate hydroelectricity for the mine. Just like the documentary shown on Peru, the mine is in the highlands of Zanatepec and would contaminate the people downstream.

Human rights organizers like Marcelino paint a picture of how globalized capitalism’s drive to integrate energy, raw materials and land under a commodity logic implicates multiple communities, not just an individual town. This serves to unite disparate villages and social groups of the sprawling Isthmus region around common concerns. The manipulation and commodification of nature is attributed to commercial interests that would ignore or harm Isthmenians who depend on the land and rivers for the reproduction of their communal lives, regardless of their specific ethnic background.

Ruben Valencia spoke next, linking the risks to community health with the question of indigenous rights:

The ancient Zapotecs of Ixtepec always knew that gold existed there: 1.2 million ounces, according to a Mexican newspaper. Like cancer, it’s best to attack this
problem early, before mining can get underway. The company needs 26 permits, and only two of those require direct permission from community members. Strong winds would bring cyanide dust not only to Ixtepec but to other pueblos, so you should organize for your own good, not just to help us.

As in the former quote, Ruben is alerting community members that the mining project has already come close to accessing his town’s gold deposits, and that this would affect communities as far downstream as Pueblo Viejo. Ruben then went on to inspire a collective sense of efficacy and legitimacy both by establishing his organization’s work as part of a larger movement, as well as symbolically grounding the dignity of the resistance in the Istmo’s prototypically feminine, matrifocal culture (Chiñas 1992). According to this framing, “indigenous” (not just Zapotec) women are prominent in direct actions to defend “mother earth” and to deny the mining companies further permits. Ruben also says that the distinctive customs retained in the Isthmus legitimize the collective rights of its people to have a voice in matters pertaining to their own territory, whether or not they speak a pre-Hispanic language:

Since February, we’ve done 35 film projections and gotten 5,000 signatures against the mine. When we in the Comité Ixtepecano located a landmark in the mountains that marked the mining company’s property, we led a march of 100 people up there to destroy the landmark (la mojonera), and it was mainly the women who destroyed it. People don’t recognize that we’re indigenous and we have rights. The national criteria for being indigenous is not just language, it’s also the food, the cultural elements, the communal assemblies of a people.

A round of commentary and questions ensued after the presentations and the documentary film showing concluded. One older Ikoots man, a member of a local fishing cooperative, spoke about how the proposed projects would impact the economic livelihoods of the local population. He said:
I’d like to participate. This information is very important. I’d like to talk to our municipal president and the council of elders (consejo ejecutivo de ancianos) about it. If the quality of our fish remains good, we won’t have to depend on government welfare programs for income.

The first part of this man’s comment is significant because the meeting apparently moved him to want to involve both of the town’s authorities (the local political leader and the traditional council of elders, who were not present) in the movement. Someone else pointed out that if polluted dust from mining lands on mango farms, the mangoes of the region won’t pass certification for export to the United States. These quotes reflect how the meeting’s speeches and film screenings aligned with the values of the region’s small fishermen and agriculturalists.

Some questions from the audience gave organizers the opportunity to re-establish the terms of their movement. One young man asked whether it would be worthwhile to negotiate some kind of benefits from the mines. In response, Ruben Valencia also cited a mining accident in northern Mexico to justify APOYO’s radical stance that any mining would be disastrous:

The idea of sustainable development is exactly the kind of argument the companies use to gain support. Even if they could clean up the arsenic and cyanide, they would have to cut down all the forest just to open the mine. There has never been any experience of [sustainable development based on mining] in this country. Look at the Sonora River: the mining company never paid their fines for contaminating the Sonora river with arsenic. We shouldn’t fall for lies.

A teacher added that passively waiting to get on the “development train” would not protect the “common good.” In these and numerous other meetings I attended in 2016 and 2017, movement groups constructed the Special Economic Zone as an impending threat to economic livelihoods, public health, indigenous cultural autonomy and
smallholder lifestyles of peasants and fishermen. These appeals have mobilized thousands of sympathetic participants (Manzo 2016) in a relatively short span of time. At least in the meetings I observed, the very groups whose lifestyles government policies are treating as backward, and in need of whole new industries, were rallying against megaprojects of the SEZ.

Subsequent meetings highlighted collective land rights and to a collective cultural identity in order to motivate diverse communities and social sectors to join the movement. A series of meetings in Ciudad Ixtepec (2.5 hours away from Pueblo Viejo, just north of Juchitán) were held in mid-November 2016 by the Comité Ixtepecano. The city of Ixtepec has about 10,000 inhabitants, many of whom speak Zapotec and/or continue to follow Zapotec traditions, in spite of the fact that the installation of the Pan-American Highway and other development projects have urbanized the area. A minority of Ixtepec’s residents still depend on agriculture (e.g. corn, sorghum, sesame) and small cattle farms.

The local COCEI branch in Ixtepec, unlike most other COCEI offices today, is not affiliated with any political party and upholds the more radical traditions of that organization: labor rights, land rights, and Zapotec identity against external domination (Campbell 1994). Social conflicts between landowners, political elites, and radical movements have been fought over ejidos and communal lands in the Istmo for at least one hundred years (Rubin 1997, Binford 1985). Intense Zapotec organizing briefly brought the COCEI to power in Juchitán in 1981 in coalition with the Mexican Communist Party, making the Isthmus the first and only province to successfully defy
Mexico’s ruling PRI (Institutional Party of the Revolution). Many of today’s movement participants in this region were COCEI partisans in the 1970s and 80s, or they are sons and daughters of these veterans.

About 40 people, mostly men over 30, congregated into the offices of the COCEI’s women’s committee (Ni Runni Binni, in Zapotec). The documentary Magdalena Teitipac: Pueblo Libre de Minería, produced by the Oaxaca-City based NGO Ojo de Agua Comunicacion about a successful anti-mine struggle in Oaxaca’s Central Valley, was screened. The 30-minute film highlights a town in which women played a key role in mobilizing public opinion to cancel a mining concession by the Plata Real company. After the film, activists from the Comité Ixtepecano revealed that Plata Real is one of the same mining companies trying to gain access to Ixtepec’s land and minerals. Speakers again pointed to how Special Economic Zones grant more power to foreign investors while contributing to the militarization and paramilitarization of the region (Paley 2016).

Ruben Valencia, one of the youngest leaders in the room, spoke from the front of the room and discussed how mining threatened public safety through both cancer and drug trafficking:

Mining is the industry that causes the most social violence, not just against the land, but narco traffic also comes in because there is money. In Ixtepec, we are not like Juchitán where you can't even go outside [due to safety]. We face poverty, but at least we live in peace. We heard from people in [the state of] Guerrero who said that yes, the mining company

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19 This sentiment in fact coincides with findings from Panama that show how the regressive tax structure of SEZ’s provides few fiscal benefits to municipalities (Sigler 2014), and how high barriers to entry for skilled labor results in SEZ’s providing few net benefits to the working class (Maurer and Yu 2011).
put up a hospital and offered some things, but half the people got cancer and many had to leave due to the narco violence that followed.

These repeated calls for the whole community to take stewardship over its natural resource base and its destiny helped instill a sense of efficacy based on a pan-ethnic collective identity. The presentations were timed to directly follow a dramatic documentary in which “people even more humble than us, from the Valley” summoned their cultural pride and forced a dishonest company to suspend its mining project. The movement’s framing is lifted from a place-based ethic in which being from an indigenous Oaxacan community entails caring for one’s surroundings and using resources sustainably. When Ruben contrasted Ixtepec to nearby Juchitán, the latter having become an enclave for violent turf battles among major criminal gangs, he relied on the cultural code that Ixtepec is a peaceful and cultured place where interpersonal trust still reigns among paisanos (townspeople, neighbors). By this logic, mining projects would greatly strain the social fabric by making Ixtepec more like Juchitán. This implies that the Comité Ixtepecano is a peaceful but determined movement that is defending citizens against a narco-corporate-extractive threat that corrupt neoliberal politicians have brought to Ixtepec’s doorstep.

A subsequent meeting in Ixtepec took place at the local Sociedad Agrícola (Agrarian Society) which office regulates the irrigation system for Ixtepec’s fields and ranches and is a key meeting space for the town’s assembly of farmers as well as for other progressive political groups. By basing their claims in the region’s romantic campesino identity, in its legacy of successful social movements, and in collective cultural standards of reciprocity that are consistent with Guendaliza’a, meetings like this one served coalesce a broad
regional coalition—uniting groups across ethnicity, class, gender, generation, and villages—that will be negatively affected by the Isthmus Special Economic Zone. The crowd of about 70 people, overwhelmingly older adults and about evenly split between men and women, listened to activists from Ixtepec speak about the proposed Lote Niza mining project, but also heard men from Salina Cruz, Tehuantepec, Juchitán, La Hollaga, and Zanatepec talk about how the Special Economic Zone would harm the Istmo. Charismatic speakers at these encounters remind their audiences of the arrival of oil, dams, and illicit forestry over the past several decades (Lucio 2016).

First, another short film about the small Oaxacan community of Magdalena Teitipac was shown. Then, the first speaker was a middle-aged man named Servando, the President of the Association of Ranchers (Asociacion Ganadera). Although the small city is urbanized, Ixtepec’s anti-mining movement has more of a popular campesino feel. Servando and I had been conversing outside before the meeting, where he talked about how middlemen exploit farmers, but also gave a sense of the ability of farmers in this region to sustain militant actions as pushback against this. He talked about selling 40 tons of sorghum to a city in Puebla state. When a buyer paid with a check that bounced, Servando reportedly told him “we’ll seize your trucks if you ever come to the Istmo.” Some other political banter about privatization went on between Servando and a local journalist after I had introduced myself to them. Servando alleged that when someone in Mexico sells a company “like TelMex” the phone company, a government official gets 5 percent of the entire company’s value simply for signing the deal. Conversations like
these helped buzzed as people grappled with the effects of the government’s “renting” of lands all over Mexico to mining companies.

Most speakers were men. Women passed out pork and beans, plus plastic glasses of lemonade and *tamarindo* as the next speaker took the floor. He was an elderly man whom I had met the previous night in Juchitán at Radio Totopo. At the request of one of his comrades in Juchitán’s APPJ organization, I met him at Juchitán’s bus stop that morning to accompany him to the Ixtepec meeting. He was quiet and reserved the previous night, but galvanized this afternoon. He gave his first talk purely in Zapotec, then repeated it in Spanish for those who were monolingual. The man said he was a fisherman who worked in Salina Cruz long before the major PEMEX refinery had been built there:

> “The government said that the oil refinery wouldn't affect us. But yes, it did—all the beaches in Salina Cruz are now poor and polluted. It will be the same with the mine. It will affect you, *companeros!* In Juchitán, for some fucking money, the people became divided and the wind parks came in. Our children will suffer this. It will affect you!”

A coordinator of neighborhood committees (*coordinador de colonias*) from Salina Cruz then spoke about how the city he grew up in is unrecognizable. He ridiculed the government’s notion that the jobs and investment from the refinery would turn Salina Cruz into a first world city:

> “Just go to *la colonia petrolera* (the oil quarter) where the people live. They say that we are against progress. But where is the progress? What the refinery *did* do was kill the fishing industry, and take the water. I know many communities nearby that still don't have electricity.”

The movement constructs mining as a continuation and an intensification of the industrial development that has impoverished the region’s small producers while degrading its
environment, and it also links extractive projects to the growing violent crime in the region which many residents are anxious about. By this cultural framing, the Special Economic Zone portends not just less income or more pollution, but the destruction of a longstanding way of life.

Marcelino of Centro de Derechos Humanos- Tepeyac noted “The history of the Istmo is a history of dispossession, of failed infrastructure. But it’s also a history of resistance.”

Isthmus Zapotecs indeed have a long and complex history of contesting external domination, such as a 1911 revolt against the dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz (Jimenez Lopez 2015), opposing the land grabs of the Spanish colonizers (Campbell and Binford 1993) and even resisting an attempted Aztec invasion in 1492 (González Licón 1990). When parts of the Isthmus threatened to secede from Mexico in 1851 (Campbell 1994), state and federal authorities intervened to suppress the rebellion, which only reinforced a sense of historical identity and a suspicion of federal power.

A campesino speaker in the audience interjected to connect environmental concerns with what he saw as government neglect of sustainable agriculture: “Why doesn’t it rain like it used to? We don’t have much water. As campesinos, water gives us life and a harvest. There’s no support from the government for us. We’re against mining.” Many others applauded these remarks, which showed a class analysis while suggesting the total dependence on sustainable resource use for those Ixtepecans who continue to farm. The federal government’s fiscal and political abandonment of the countryside is readily blamed for the current precarity of small campesinos and ranchers.
By defining mining as a new potential threat to precious water in times of drought, and by accusing the Mexican state elite of indifference, movement groups activate an oppositional community of indigenous *campesinos* into collective pre-emptive action.

The movement links its demands to the physical and cultural survival of indigenous people, not just as individual citizens but as historically defined groups with a claim to a specific geographic territory. At stake for participants is the region’s sustainable food production guided by the give-and-take logic of *Guendaliza’a*; a place-based environmental ethic that cherishes natural resources for their beauty as well as their use value; and the ability of groups to make autonomous decisions in matters that affect livelihood and territory. The Isthmus SMOs affiliated with the APOYO coalition each lament depeasantization (which means the phasing out of small-scale agriculture by agribusiness and food imports e.g. McMichael 2008, Bello 2008). At the same time, they problematize the erosion of ethnic identity (which includes the loss of a communal spirit) among Isthmus Zapotecs and *Ikoots*. Constructing mining projects in this light allows for multiple and diverse groups of ethnicities, farmers, environmentalists, and left-parties to unite for the “defense” of the Isthmus.

In proclaiming why the local COCEI branch joined the *Comité Ixtepecano*, Heriberto highlighted the rural roots and character of Ixtepec, even though the town has become largely urbanized: “Ixtepec is an indigenous and *campesino* community. We have native corn. We will fight so that these companies don’t pollute it.”

Perhaps inspired by the women in the documentary film, a woman from the *Comité Ixtepecano* commented that “we should march with signs” through Ixtepec on
November 20, the emblematic anniversary of the Mexican revolution. Isabel Nunez, an older woman who is frequently quoted representing the Comité in both mainstream and alternative media, said that the only development she wanted is “one that’s in accord with our lives and cultures.” These calls to action and claims reflect a collective identity rooted both in the legacy of the Mexican revolution’s land reforms as well as the ancestral cultures that predate it. Participants tend to see the government as betraying its responsibility to the nation’s pueblos and natural resources. This is why they ventured to raise explicitly political demands against mining on November 20 2016, a day where parades are normally managed by local governments as sentimental displays of patriotism.

This multitude of mutually reinforcing claims, customs, and planned repertoires reflects how a collective culture is crucial in shaping which collective action frames will be effective for initiating a resistance movement. Local customs are placed in a larger context of the impending loss of communal land rights and the destruction of political autonomy. Strands of a prior oppositional culture can be joined to form a robust oppositional consciousness when an entire collective identity is at stake. Nashieli, a feminist Zapotec activist in Ixtepec, echoes this point:

This is the territory of our ancestors. What we are defending is our right to continue our lives (seguir con vida) here, and we want the territory to continue to be utilized by those who come after us. We don’t need to offer any other justification for opposing gold extraction here. It’s not even really about whether they take the gold or not. The territory is ours and we have to defend this right to life.

The sway of indigenous cultural codes on movement frames and repertoires in the Tehuantepec Isthmus was illustrated when I would ask movement participants the
question: “You’re against the mines, but what kind of alternative is your movement for?” Respondents commonly answered “We’re for life itself” (*La vida*), by which they mean a specific set of material and symbolic relationships among people (and between human beings and the natural environment).

Sociological analysis has extensively researched how frames shape movement outcomes, but it tends to emphasize the force of cultural ideas such as norms, values and beliefs. In my research, frames do matter, but the *source* of these frames lies in pre-existing collective identities and in material conditions. *Comunalidad*, as “a way of understanding life as being permeated with spirituality, symbolism, and a greater integration with nature…[is] an historical experience and a vibrant, present day set of behaviors, which is constantly renovated in the face of the social and economic contradictions generated by capitalist individualism” (Luna 2010). Since indigenous cosmovisions are being reinforced in everyday social interactions and customs, the framing that I observe verges more on a way of life, wherein “culture” is more of a praxis rather than a set of cognitive beliefs.

In Isthmus society, impressions about work, politics, and communal life are acquired and formed in open-air markets, fiestas, cooperatives, and assemblies where people gather to dialogue and (often) reach conclusions in common. Through the use of films, pamphlets, social media, and forums, SMOs revive and re-purpose this culture in a variety of ways by addressing supporters in socially significant locations, whether it’s the

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20 A “cosmovision” can simply be defined as a particular way of viewing the world and of understanding the universe.
radical community school of Ixhuatán, the shores of the lagoons in which the fishermen of Pueblo Viejo fish, or the halls of Ixtepec’s agrarian cooperatives and COCEI office. Just as Fantasia (1988) justifiably argues that speeches, talk and ideas do not spur social movements in and of themselves, Hart (1996: 91) insists that “interaction and activity are a crucial part of the culture-making process.” In these ways, pre-emptive grievances and strategies for the defense of “life” appropriate (and further elaborate) a range of pre-existing cultural and political traditions. This has also been shown in recent case studies of Oaxacan and Afro-Brazilian social movements that explicitly “deploy culture as a means to mobilize or engage participants” (Alvarez 2018: 6). To invoke political sociology, “ideas, rituals and longstanding patterns of interaction” (Mansbridge 2001: 7) fixed in Isthmus culture act as a force that undergirds organizers’ calls for stopping the SEZ.

One should avoid determinism and traditional functionalist views of culture, wherein norms and values are thought to be understood uniformly by members of a society or community. Not all activists hold unanimous opinions over the meaning and proper uses of *comunalidad* and *Guendaliza’a*. Manuel Antonio Ruiz sees *comunalidad* as a term that captures “all facets of community life.” By contrast, he views *Guendaliza’a* as having been “coined by the Isthmus Zapotec elite.” Perhaps this is due to how *Guendaliza’a* downplays class differences by bestowing prestige upon wealthier Zapotecs who pay for seasonal festivities. (Also, it is conceivable that the more these concepts are rescued, written down, and debated by local intellectuals and by purveyors of Isthmus culture, the more that local people will have the opportunity to critique and
interpret them to suit their contextual needs). Still, Manuel sees the two concepts as mostly similar (quizá sea lo mismo guendalizá que comunalidad). He tells me:

“Comunalidad means living here and now with our own identity. For example, we want to continue being binnizá (Zapotec) but we also want to use tablets and cell phones. We want to keep existing as we are, and we are against transnationals changing our way of life.”

APOYO’s organizing further shows how movement recruitment is a social process embedded in material structures—it is not mainly a cognitive process whereby SMOs cater to participants’ individual beliefs through rhetorical soundbytes. In this specific case, frames and repertoires emerge out of pre-existing collective cultural traditions, class struggles, and the reciprocal social interactions that are typical for members of these communities. Although collective action frames as interpretive schema are crucial for legitimizing movement activities among potential recruits, the structural and spatial factors of the region allow an oppositional consciousness to spread quickly and broadly, despite considerable social and geographic differences between individual communities and ethnic groups.

**OPPOSITIONAL COMMUNITIES REACH FOR OPPOSITIONAL TOOLKITS**

Social movements that accomplish this kind of cultural work also tend to reinforce and reinvigorate present-day cultures that have been suppressed by nation-states. This has relevance to Ann Swidler’s cultural theories, in which culture is a “toolkit” that supplies actors with their habits, skills and styles. Swidler (1986) refers to an “unsettled social period” as a moment in time in which ideological battles become
explicit and cultural meanings (e.g. ideas like development, progress, autonomy and local identity) are more widely debated. Since the Tehuantepec Isthmus and many regions like it are becoming a focus of substantial foreign investment and plans for intensified resource extraction that would greatly alter their natural surroundings and social relations, its people are undergoing a period of considerable change and uncertainty. Swidler argues that since dominant culture may have less ability to limit or constrain people’s actions and beliefs during such unsettled periods, people tend to jettison or recombine their inherited ideas in new ways, which then leads to cultural innovation.

Nonetheless, one could surmise that the outcomes of this process may be wholly different for oppositional communities whose subordinated ways of life differ from a state’s dominant national culture. The aforementioned work of Morris and Braine (2001) on oppositional cultures implies that cultural dynamics in times of conflict can differ markedly depending upon a group’s social location in existing structures of inequality, including class relations and ethnic hierarchies, and their ties with political organizations. In the current unsettled social period, oppositional ethnic groups in Mexico and other nations tend to reject government-backed free trade projects for fear of how these might impact their everyday livelihoods and collective identity. By linking their frames and strategies to idealized indigenous cultures of cooperation, SMOs forge a link between an oppositional community’s lived experiences, its historical memories, and the threatening present conditions by reminding people “who they are,” and by pinpointing who or what to unite the community against.
This process sheds additional light on how and why social movements can act as mechanisms of cultural *continuity*, as opposed to the cultural “innovation” that Swidler (1986) emphasizes during “unsettled periods.” When movements acting on behalf of oppressed groups work to maintain normative ideals of how life should be, and struggle to sustain the group’s existing relation to their natural surroundings in a way that makes sense to them, the distinctive cultural patterns of the group may be bolstered. This is especially the case during periods of crisis, such as when people (with the help of active framing and organizing by SMOs) come to perceive a set of policies as antagonistic to their collective identities. Movement groups acting in the name of oppositional culture can provide the framing and political backing that can legitimate resistance while discouraging assimilation. Relations of structural power, together with the presence of identity-based movements, should thus be seen as strongly influential in whether marginalized cultures are willing to adapt to unsettled social periods by recombining their own values with those of the dominant culture, as Swidler’s model suggests, or whether they take the path of political/cultural resistance. The case of socio-environmental conflict in the Isthmus suggests that the latter path (resistance) can result in a rededication to a group’s internal norms and collective identities, rather than dissolving cultural disparities.

**CONCLUSIONS: INDIGENOUS FRAMES AND THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF RESISTANCE**

These vignettes illustrate how the grievances, goals, and strategic repertoires developed by leading activists in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec have elaborated the region’s latent oppositional culture into a more coherent and active oppositional consciousness.
(consciencia) that resists absorption into Mexico’s version of market-driven “development.” Movement participants of various ages, ethnicities, communities, occupations, and political persuasions are nourished by a rich sense of collective memory that was tempered throughout distinct historical episodes of grassroots political resistance. SMOs have created a sizeable political force among a regional population that is increasingly stratified (e.g. by class, industry, political party, and occupation).

Benford’s “insider’s critique” (1997) of the framing perspective identified several weaknesses in the earlier framing literature, such as static tendencies, elite bias, and reification. The early framing literature traditionally treated activists as “rational actors with an instrumental orientation who do what is necessary to maximize support for their group” (Reese and Newcombe 2003: 297). In distinction to this utilitarian, Western model of action, Polletta (1997) details how pre-existing cultural relationships are one important aspect of social structure that can enable movement organizing. This is particularly relevant when the goals, grievances and strategies of movements grow out of indigenous forms of sociality such as comunalidad. Moving away from rationalism and individualist frameworks, I show that agency always occurs in a political and cultural context, and that activists’ choices can only be evaluated and understood in relation to this larger background (Meyer 2004: 128). Also, rather than focusing solely on the testimonies of movement leaders, I examine how their claims and calls to action are received in real-time by non-elite participants at an early (pre-emptive) stage of environmental justice mobilization, as called for some time ago by Benford (1997). Audience members responded with enthusiasm in three different towns who differ in
terms of their social, ethnic, and geographic profiles. This is because pan-indigenous culture in the semi-rural and indigenous Isthmus of Tehuantepec is reinforced through the social obligations that community members have to each other in the region’s elaborate informal web of mutual aid. Reciprocity is facilitated by formal institution of collective land tenure.

Frame resonance is partly about how SMO narratives mesh with participants’ values (Snow 1988). However, rather than a set of personal motivations that movement organizers strive to cater to through “frame alignment” (Snow and Benford 1992), indigenous culture tends to prioritize social obligations to the community and caring for the land. This example clarifies how cultural codes tend to favor certain demands, recruitment patterns and alliances over others. Frames, grievances, and repertoires of collective action are each born “within the space produced by the limits and possibilities thrown up by structures” (Bartholomew and Mayer 1992: 153). Since collective action frames and repertoires are cultural and political products, they cannot run too far ahead of people’s lived experiences. This is to say, frames and repertoires will be influenced by the local culture which activists have compellingly named by extending the term *comunalidad* to their own Isthmus context.

Reese and Newcombe (2003) argue that activists’ rhetorical and tactical strategies (their framing options) are strategically drawn from the organizational ideologies they are committed to, instead of being selected at will. While this is important, it is also useful to emphasize how many indigenous cultures today are distinct from, and shape, organizational ideologies. Like organizational ideologies, indigenous cultures of
opposition are more stable, and more constant, than collective action frames. However, as the very basis for communal life, *comunalidad* is more abstract than both of these. The oppositional consciousness fashioned out of a pre-existing Isthmenian collective identity appears strong enough to sustain a multi-class alliance, as was the case in the diverse Juchitán rebellions of the 19th and 20th century (Campbell et al 1993: 40). This oppositional culture has been incubated by the memory of past uprisings, and by the organizational autonomy that communal landownership has afforded. For these reasons, I would surmise that *comunalidad/Guendaliza’a* are capable of legitimating broad social alliances within and between communities against foreign-controlled megaprojects. This is true even in today’s context where much more class differentiation exists among indigenous groups. Likewise, the complete lack of a broad, visible and organized counter-movement (Zald and Useem 1987: 247-48) in the Isthmus (i.e. a grassroots pro-mining movement) would also seem to attest to the social acceptability of the movement’s anti-mine claims.

This chapter contributes to a growing body of scholarship documenting how global capitalist culture is being rejected by indigenous people for erasing their identities (Alfred and Corntassel 2005, Fenehal and Hall 2008) and for promoting the despoliation of their lands (Bárcenas and Galicia 2011). It is not clear whether the strategies and frameworks that I have highlighted in this chapter will be capable of stopping mines in the Istmo, and it is entirely debatable whether the idealized constructs of indigeneity can offer systemic solutions to imperialism and climate change (Fabricant 2013). But it seems evident that indigenous organizations and communities with their own forms of relating
to the natural environment (and to each other) will continue to make their presence felt as megaprojects in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec gain momentum.

As social scientists continue to explore these topics, it would be especially beneficial to integrate native standpoints into our analytical frameworks. In studying how local frameworks like *comunalidad*/*Guendaliza’a* are being wielded as an everyday force of popular resistance to environmental racism and transnational capital, future research should also try to account for how activists manage tensions in their attempt to build coalitions across ethnicity, class, gender, language, and region. The next two chapters delve into how gender ideologies and gender relations in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec are enacted as well as critiqued within indigenous activist organizations and among those who participate in efforts for social change.
CHAPTER IV
Indigeneity, Gender, and Social Reproduction in an Era of Globalization: A Historical and Theoretical Synthesis

Beginning with an assessment of the body of literature on the gender relations in and around the Isthmus city of Juchitán, this chapter elaborates my approach to the study of gender by linking patriarchy to global capitalism, dispossession and reproduction. I merge indigenous feminist, Marxist and world-systems perspectives with sociological views of gender inequality. This leads me to an anti-colonial and materialist-feminist perspective on social reproduction that lays the foundation for the empirical narrative of the next chapter.

“WHERE WOMEN RULE”? PANORAMA OF A CONTESTED, GENDERED TERRAIN

In looking at how social movements against the Isthmus Special Economic Zone intersect with and defend social reproduction, it is vital to first appreciate how gender relations have been constructed and disputed in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. Zapotec women in this region of Oaxaca have been famously represented by outsiders as towering, assertive over men, and sexually untamed. The Istmo has been constructed as an exception to the prevailing patriarchy in Mexico. Paintings by Diego Rivera, portraits of Frida Kahlo, writings of the prominent Mexican Marxist Miguel Covarrubias (1986) and the famous Mexican feminist journalist Elena Poniatowska (1989), and even contemporary English-language journalism in the *Los Angeles Times* and *Elle* have created a storyline in which the city of Juchitán in particular stands out as a socialistic utopia, run by entrepreneurial matriarchs whose men defer to feminine dominion.
To the extent that there is some exceptional quality to gender relations among the Zapotecs (and I generally take the position that there is), the source of this unique gender order remains unresolved. Historians do not know whether the penchant for “matriarchy” originated with the Zapotecs themselves centuries ago, or whether the Zapotecs simply inherited some pre-existing matriarchal mannerisms of the agricultural Isthmus region when they first migrated here from the Valley of Oaxaca and gradually became hegemonic over other ethnic groups around present-day Tehuantepec (Bennholdt-Thomsen 1997: 22).

Alfredo Mirandé’s research on the third-gender *muxes* of Juchitán touches on Isthmus women’s distinctive commercial roles: “Because women assume the role of merchants and traders in the market, they also typically control familial resources and are recognized as the economic heads of households” (Mirandé 2016: 69).

This echoes U.S. travel writers like Stephen Birnbaum (1985: 489) who have also represented Juchitán as a city where women appropriate economic positions of status:

Here in a country committed to machismo, a society exists in which women have social and cultural dominance. Women run the businesses, handle the commerce and trade, hold the purse strings, and run the banks, while the men are relegated to planting and harvesting the fields.

This preponderance of women as the organizers of economic exchange (as well as of elaborate social festivities like *velas*) affords them more decision-making power in the nuclear family than is socially typical in Mexico. In the male-dominated systems that Western academics are more familiar with, men are held responsible for producing surplus and “providing” for their families financially, which gives them disproportionate power in both domestic and public spheres over women.
California-based anthropologist Beverly Chiñas made it her life’s work to document and interpret this female-centered culture (and its many other fascinating and alluring quirks besides its “sex roles”) since her first field research visits to Juchitán in the 1960s. In the second edition of *The Isthmus Zapotecs: A Matrifocal Culture of Mexico* (Chiñas 1992) and in a later edition (Chiñas 2002), she argues that the Isthmus of Tehuantepec resides within the patriarchal space of Mexico, but that the Zapotecs of the Isthmus maintain pseudo-matriarchal social patterns in a kind of cultural independence from Mexico’s dominant traditions.

She elaborates: “Anthropologists have never encountered any truly matriarchal societies, i.e. cultures in which the women’s roles are mirror images of men’s roles in patriarchal societies” (Chiñas 1992). She prefers to call the Zapotecs of the Isthmus a *matrifocal* culture. Rather than involving the literal rule over men by women, matrifocal systems still confer power and status to men, but both women and men can hold roles that are ritually important. For example, men’s spiritual roles in Zapotec religious arrangements are not necessarily normatively dominant over those of women, as they are in much of Western religion. Furthermore, Isthmus society is also matrilineal, because inheritance is established from the mother’s line of ancestry. In my own trips to the Isthmus, I have noticed a fairly widespread tolerance of male homosexuality, while Isthmus women seem far less reserved and deferential to men in social situations than women in other regions of Oaxaca I visited.\(^{21}\)

\(^{21}\) It should be noted that Zapotecs in Oaxaca’s Sierra Norte, Sierra Sur and Central Valley speak a different version of Zapotec than Isthmus Zapotecs, and that these non-Isthmus Zapotecs are also not known for being matrifocal. Though the origins of matrifocality in the Isthmus are not well-known, it is
Chiñas’ work influenced a long line of feminist anthropologists and sociologists that have since theorized about the puzzle of gender relations in Juchitán. Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen (1997) argues that Juchitán has several elements in common with matriarchal cultures, including its merging of Christian religion with animist traditions; its environmental ethic; its reciprocity; and an ethos that values mothers. This final point reproduces the notion that motherhood is the ultimate symbol of procuring life, in which women are thus treated as special for their ability to give birth. Given how she writes that feminists who denigrate motherhood are complicit in the normative undervaluing of women’s work, her idealization of the region’s gender structure is not surprising (Bennholdt-Thomsen 1997: 26). She and her co-authors find the label of “matriarchy” to be appropriate for delineating the uniqueness of Isthmus women’s dominion over the small-scale economic sector, such as open-air markets. Based on my interpretation of indigenous mobilizations in the Zapotec-dominated region of the Isthmus, these views warrant some critique.

To be sure, none of these authors see the dry tropical Isthmus territory as a gender utopia. My own fieldwork, interviews and many conversations in the region have also disabused me of this impulse. Yet, many economic and social roles are still clearly demarcated and segregated by sex. Formal politics, poetry, art, cantinas (bars), salaried work and field work are typically seen as male spaces, while women dominate the settings of the market, the home, velas, the streets, and the church. Open-air markets can

possible that the Zapotecs in the Isthmus adopted matrilineal kinship from other groups that they conquered when they first migrated south and east into that region circa 1500.
be a place of power where women aggressively hawk the retail products they produced or the food their husbands harvested or fished. Colorful, billowy, embroidered blouses famous throughout Mexico are the quintessential traditional female attire in Juchitán and its surrounding pueblos. These typical *huipiles* and jewelry mark women’s roles as distinct to those of men, but they also celebrate the almost regal power that women are seen to have in community life. Modern Western dress patterns are also sex segregated, but the expectation in our cultures that women display more skin in tighter-fitting clothes is part of the persistent sexualization of the feminine—precisely the opposite of the deferential esteem that Isthmus women are generally afforded by way of their dignified, loose-fitting and handmade attire.

In short, gender absolutely exists and matters in the Isthmus. It operates in persistent gender role segregation, social interactions, and in pay discrimination against women. Nevertheless, Chíñas (1992, 2002) concludes that gender relations in the Isthmus are not the same type of patriarchy one finds in other parts of Mexico. Throughout her work, she gives the impression that Isthmus Zapotec benefit from pro-equality social attitudes of this region.

Many analysts (as well as many Zapotecs themselves) also point to the political realm to justify their arguments that women have repeatedly played key roles in uprisings and mobilizations that served as important turning points in the region’s history. Giebeler (in [Bennholdt-Thomsen 1997]) points to the symbolic importance of mothers in the political movements and raucous political culture of the Isthmus: “The strength of Zapotec resistance can only survive…while the culture of ‘strong mothers’ and the
economy of reciprocity determines the cultural and social richness of Juchitán” (pp. 128-129). For example, when Juchitán’s male-dominated political administration tried to increase the fees for renting booths in markets in the early 1980s, women were incensed, and this drove them to protest alongside their husbands in the COCEI (Coalition of Workers, Peasants, and Students of the Isthmus). Both forms of politics (men in the formal sphere and women in the informal sphere) were crucial in advancing COCEI’s agenda of land rights, labor rights, political democracy, and ethnic pride against the PRI (Party of the Institutional Revolution) which then governed Juchitán (ibid 149-150). However, this political experience, and the subsequent academic renderings of it by writers like Giebeler (1997) and Chiñas (1992), are still rooted in inequality: men dominate both the more privileged “modern” economy and political administration (including COCEI, the main “leftist” party). Women do not “rule” economic or political life in Juchitán or in the Isthmus. Saynes-Vázquez (1996) calls attention to how the small-scale trades populated by almost exclusively by local women are precariously remunerated, and how women are decidedly not encouraged to insist upon equal rights in the family sphere. These points anticipate how the local Zapotec and Zoque feminists in my following chapter problematize the social norms and modes of political organizing in their own communities.

The legacy of COCEI’s struggle helps set the context for the contemporary resistance to the Isthmus Special Economic Zone by influencing some of today’s political imaginaries, demands and (gendered) patterns of participation. But, COCEI’s legacy is not without its contradictions, because these same political imaginaries can also
romanticize women’s status while sidestepping women’s liberation. Academics have also contributed to distorting this question, such as when Chiñas asserts "it is not only acceptable for women to exercise power and authority... it is culturally expected and encouraged” (1992: 87). In fact, Saynes-Vázquez (1996: 203) points out how women are expected to take care of childrearing and household tasks while at the same time working outside of the home. She is also correct to question (as a Zapotec and as an anthropologist) why Zapotec women’s attendance of political rallies, and why their openness about sexual jokes, has been treated by researchers as so exceptional. Indeed, “while women attend the rallies, men and children do the same thing” (Saynes-Vázquez 1996: 199).

To summarize, while gender roles and ideologies are always complex in how they are experienced and shaped over time, they have clearly eluded numerous observers of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. Most of the aforementioned writers, both Mexican and foreign, who have participated in cementing an overly idealized matriarchy myth have done so out of genuine admiration for the region’s charm and its attractive “feminine” culture. Though I am not arguing that any such text about the Isthmus should be discredited out of hand, I find such descriptions to be ethnographically superficial. The danger in these simple characterizations is that in their attempt to locate the empowered femininity that non-Isthmus women have sought in their own patriarchal contexts, these writers ended up reifying Isthmus society and obscuring those gender relations that deviate from the Istmo’s matriarchal ideal.
Some twenty years ago, Howard Campbell (a U.S. anthropologist who married a Zapotec woman after spending years living in the Isthmus) and Susan Green questioned the glowing depictions of Juchitán’s women by outside feminist photographers, journalists, and academics. Even though Campbell and Green appreciate the difference between the marked colonialist discourses that have often degraded or eroticized Zapotec women, and the more affirming accounts of Isthmus life written by sympathetic women observers, they still find fault with a “feminist gaze” that has “merely repeated images of primitive Amazons deeply rooted in Western constructions of non-Western societies (Campbell and Green 1996: 177). For them, this kind of methodological error is “also informed by the desire to create a certain kind of Zapotec female subject (in this case, an emancipated one) for an urban, non-Zapotec public. For feminists, Zapotec women’s lives represent the equality and freedom they lack” (Campbell and Green 1996: 173).

Campbell and Green’s 1996 article concludes that Zapotec women themselves should be part of this debate about their culture, and that their voices should be included. But “more voices” do not necessarily make for a “richer debate.” Since Zapotec women are quite diverse, the solution for field researchers is not so simple as giving Zapotec women the microphone to “express and defend” their own views. Even among women who are active on the political left, their social heterogeneity gives rise to a great many political standpoints, all of which are evolving over time. Some of my female respondents who have studied the social sciences and humanities in college classes articulate a very clear position on gender, and they consciously approach their community work and many aspects of their lives through a feminist lens. Others either
make no mention of patriarchy, matriarchy or feminism in discussing their motivations for community activism, or they do not see the immediate utility of introducing a gender perspective into the mobilizations in defense of indigenous land and territory. As Naples (1998) argues, knowing the social location of women community activists helps make sense of their political and personal life paths. Accordingly, Isthmus women vary in terms of their “racial and ethnic identities, class position, family role, sexuality, and gender, as well as geographic, political, and cultural factors that shape their relationship to others inside and outside their defined communities” (Naples 1998: 8). This is why environmental and human rights activists can have very different assessments of whether, and how, their organizations should tie their analysis of capitalism and colonialism to an analysis of gender oppression.

Political scientist Jeffrey Rubin writes “Political movements must essentialize, in order to represent, in both the cultural and political senses, and in order to make a comprehensible number of claims on behalf of large numbers of people…But what are the relationships between external claims and internal experiences?” (Rubin 2004: 126). Interviewing villagers and movement participants of different ages, political backgrounds, genders, and ethnicities can help us understand why different members understand “the defense of life and territory” very differently based upon their social locations. This analysis helps further specify the interrelations between the external claims and internal experiences characteristic of radical indigenous activism in Mexico’s Tehuantepec Isthmus that Rubin (2004) posited. This requires disentangling the place of
gender in Oaxacan social movements, while looking at how neoliberal policies at the transnational level have impacted women and social reproduction in general.

**GENDER AND RESISTANCE IN OAXACA**

Since environmental harms are unequally distributed in most societies, with women, the poor and ethnic minorities suffering disproportionately from environmental degradation, environmental conflicts are often embedded in (or lead to) movements for gender and ethnic rights. Mining, with its emphasis on physical endurance, is traditionally seen as “men’s work.” Women in Latin America often emerge as leaders against large economic projects that tend to privatize communal ownership customs (Veuthey and Gerber 2012), yet the role of women in such conflicts is still not well understood.

Recent field research conducted in the state of Oaxaca on socio-environmental conflicts shows how the politicization of indigenous ethnicity has successfully challenged racial domination and the violation of human rights (Lucio 2012). However, the multitude of ways in which gender identities are consciously mobilized in anti-mining organizations and other forms of resistance has not been studied as comprehensively. For example, the political economy research on anti-extraction movements is often gender-blind (e.g. Veltmeyer and Petras 2014). The way in which increased resource extraction and free trade projects affect the intersection of class, race and gender at the local level in movements of resistance has been undertheorized.

As noted by Ballard and Banks (2003: 292), “[t]he strongly patriarchal nature of the industry and its workforce fuels a transnational mining labor culture that places a
premium on expressions of masculinity, alcohol, and violence.” Oaxacan women have framed their opposition to mining in terms of its environmental impacts, including deforestation, water pollution, hazardous liquid waste and harm to arable land which threaten to displace communities and dispossess them of their livelihoods (Lucio 2012: 111, Giarraca 2006: 42). In order to study the conditions under which mining (or the threat thereof) stimulates and shapes women’s activism, it is worthwhile to unpack how the interaction of participants’ gender identities with other identities and experiences shapes personal activist trajectories and the larger movement for defense of territory. As said by M. Bahati Kuumba, “socially embedded concepts of gender impact the justification for protest,” but additionally, “gender is also constructed and reconstructed in the process of movement participation” (Kuumba 2001: 56).

In the field, I encountered and befriended various other researchers on socio-environmental conflicts as well as community activists. When I told them that one of my project’s aims was to study gender in Oaxaca’s territorial movements, many were interested and had much insight to share. But some seemed skeptical. Female as well as male Mexican sociologists who were also studying indigenous movements in Mexico would flatly tell me that they are not studying gender—that it’s “not an analytical category” they’re using in their own case studies. I remained curious about why activist research would not intellectually deal with gender—an emergent phenomenon around which so much of everyday life is organized. Especially women’s centrality to Isthmus culture and to social movements in Juchitán, I always felt compelled, as a male researcher
conscious of patriarchy’s systematic global existence, to ask “Where are the women?” in this movement (Enloe 1989).

My desire to analyze the “gendered nature” of indigenous struggles for defense of nature, especially as a male outsider, is complex. Some researchers as well as activists may believe that in indigenous struggles against transnational corporations, gender is too much of a “micro” concern that is not as worthy an analytical lens through which to view political economy or indigenous collective rights. This perspective fails to appreciate how gender is integrated into the global political economy in profound ways, and how patriarchal structures and beliefs shape mobilizations for collective rights. Others justifiably reject liberal feminism as a form of Western individualism that presupposes a structure of power (a state) that has the legitimate authority to regulate individuals’ rights (and with that, to seize, manage and otherwise privatize indigenous property regimes).

Gladys Tzul Tzul is a Mayan sociologist from Guatemala who specializes in studying indigenous forms of governance and communal politics, describing herself (among other things) as a Foucauldian. Part of her work has highlighted how indigenous communities are laden with power dynamics and symbolic relations that women participate in but also critique. This focus is especially helpful and relevant to my research. In talking about how indigenous movements have faced a long struggle against colonialism, she acknowledges the contradictoriness of certain “relational alliances” (alianzas de parentesco) that these movements are forced to make in order to protect lands and territories from megaprojects. Among these imperfect partnerships, she identifies participating in the official legal process and relying on male-dominated
patterns of land ownership that have historically excluded women from having control over these very lands. She points out that communal land inherited through patrilineal lines “recreates hierarchies” (Tzul Tzul 2015: 137) by marginalizing widows, daughters, wives, and unmarried women. She concludes that “patrilocal frameworks” (tramas patrilocales) are “a political-juridical strategy that communal systems of [indigenous] governance constructed to halt the expropriation of lands and to avoid the national project of converting communal lands into private property” (Tzul Tzul 2015: 134), but that such patrilocal (male-centered) forms of reproducing the community also have to be challenged and transformed to allow women full participation and representation in their communities as well as in their liberation struggles.

Tzul Tzul suggests that if indigenous systems of governance still rest on women’s unpaid and unequal reproductive labor or affective work, territories (and the women in them) will not become free of state domination:

Women are the ones who take care of planting, children, and much of the communal work. This work is what creates a climate of stability for everyone in the household…The Indigenous system of government exists because of women’s work. The challenge for both men and women is to understand this process. When half of those involved are oppressed, it’s impossible to sustain a system of government, a struggle for change (interviewed in Hernandez 2014).

This answers those colleagues who might question the utility of a gender frame for conducting research on how people mobilize against potential dispossession of communal land and resources. One must look at the relative positioning of women to men in communities of resistance in order to see how global as well as local power structures impact women’s ability to mobilize for liberation. In a social order that is gendered, as
the Isthmus indeed is, women and men experience different paths into, and roles within, territorial mobilizations. Isabel Altamirano-Jimenez is a Zapotec political scientist who (like Gladys Tzul Tzul) is skeptical of indigenous movements that reify the feminine, while she also criticizes the underlying racism of neoliberal governance:

In asserting nationhood, Indigenous nationalism mobilizes narratives and the rights discourse to represent place as a homogenous space where women’s concerns and aspirations are not evident. In addition, the state itself mobilizes a human rights framework that disempowers Indigenous women because they are constructed as ‘victims of their own culture’ rather than as subjects challenging racism, prejudice, patriarchy, and inequitable social and economic circumstances (Altamirano-Jimenez 2013: 85).

Informed by the insights of these two indigenous feminist scholar-activists, my analysis below engages the relevant voices of other feminist sociologists and critics of global capitalism.

Whether social movement organizations acknowledge gender inequality, and exactly how they navigate local gender relations both conceptually, programmatically and organizationally bears greatly on whether such grassroots movements usher in substantive social change. Taking up gender issues in a deliberate and systematic manner has much to do with whether a given struggle succeeds in reconfiguring the interconnected structures of patriarchy, environmental racism, and extractive imperialism, or at least raises consciousness about the need to achieve such a change.

The personal outcomes of radical social movements for women have also been shown to depend on the specific gender ideologies of the groups they join. For example, Jocelyn Viterna (2013) suggested that since the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) guerrillas in El Salvador did not have an explicitly feminist focus, most
women guerrillas returned to traditionally conservative gender roles after the war. Though their direct experience in revolutionary warfare could be thought of as highly gender-bending, their time in the FMLN did not lead to feminist ideological or political outcomes once the conflict subsided and FMLN became a “legitimate” political party. Only those former women guerrillas who were in leadership positions during the armed struggle were able to move up the social ladder into formal politics and into NGOs once the war ended.

The additional reason to pursue a sustained, localized analysis of interrelated gender roles, identities and ideologies with women’s participation in anti-systemic movements is that patriarchy is fundamentally woven into global capitalism and imperialism. For example, after reviewing the neoliberal period of world economic rule in the 1990s, Moghaddam (1999: 150) concludes that

> Capitalist accumulation is achieved through the surplus extraction of labor, and this includes the paid and unpaid economic activities of women, whether in male-headed or female-headed households. Global accumulation as the driving force of the world-system not only hinges on class and regional differences across economic zones, it is a gendered process as well, predicated upon the gender difference in the spheres of production and reproduction.

In this way, hierarchical gender relations are a core facet of resource extraction, class relations, culture, politics, the state, cultural constructions of nature, and overall social relations in most of our world today.

Mies and Shiva (2004) posit that the search for identity and difference will continue to grow as the world-system intensifies resource extraction and homogenizes cultures while fragmenting them at the same time. Their “subsistence perspective”
addresses the multiplicity of ways that feminists seek “women’s liberation from male domination,” while at the same time, this perspective aims to “address the inherent inequalities in world structures which permit the North to dominate the South, men to dominate women, and the frenetic plunder of ever more resources for ever more unequally distributed economic gains to dominate nature” (Mies and Shiva 2004: 333).

This point echoes debates and developments within feminist thought from decades prior, such as the ways in which women’s movements in the Global South negotiated their gender demands with simultaneous axes of inequality in which they were enmeshed. For example, Gilmartin (1995: 6-7) captures how some strands of “third wave” feminist scholarship began to take imperialism’s connections with other social identities more seriously:

In contesting the very meaning of the term ‘feminism,’ [some] scholars draw attention to the fact that feminist movements in the non-Western world have been compelled by their localities to address the intersection of gender oppression with imperialist, racial and class oppression. ... In other words, modern feminist movements in the third world have been compelled by the realities of western hegemony to broaden their agendas by connecting their effort to end gender oppression with struggles for national liberation.

Building on this view of the literature, I have developed a materialist, anti-colonial reading of feminist social science. This has led me to appreciate how men and women who are differentially situated in social space each have different experiences with, and reactions to, a) the gendered order of everyday life in the Isthmus, and b) the broader movements for social/territorial/environmental justice in the region. I explain this further in the remainder of this theoretical chapter.
GENDER, REPRODUCTION AND GLOBAL CAPITAL: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Women’s oppression cannot be studied or addressed “in isolation, abstracted out of the myriad contradictions in which it [is] enmeshed and which [give] it its particular identity and reality” (Knehans 2007: 198). Likewise, neither can “eco-territorial movements” (Tetreault 2014a) to preserve land and livelihoods be studied without assessing the role of gender relations and ideologies on patterns and forms of mobilization. They must reckon with how global capitalism continually re-shapes gender relations. This dialectical feminist perspective applies to social reproduction.

To analyze gendered resistance in one of Latin America’s fast-globalizing peripheries, we must trace the influence of global forces on local ideas, lives, and choices. Structure is in fact located squarely within people’s lives. Globalized capitalism has affected social reproduction in the Oaxacan context by incorporating communities into more intensive webs of accumulation. People’s interpretation of threats to communal forms of life proceeds through understandings and experiences that are native to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, as shown in the previous chapter. But, like indigenous cultures today, this culture has become urbanized, politically fractured, and class differentiated during the past two or more decades of state-led (and now corporate-led) capitalist “development” (Giebeler 1997). Social movements and other political organizations have proliferated in response to these modernizing forces. It follows that gender is socially constructed not only in families, but also in and by social movement organizations. Basic questions for a social movement about what constitutes a legitimate movement strategy, of who gets to participate and how, and of whether fighting for gender equality is an
integral part of defending indigenous rights, are thus all going to have gendered aspects and implications.

I reject binary separations of *production* and *reproduction*. One shouldn’t be privileged over the other, whether politically in social movements or analytically by theorists:

Feminists use social reproduction to refer to the activities and attitudes, behaviors and emotions, responsibilities and relationships directly involved in the maintenance of life on a daily basis, and intergenerationally...In the feminist argument, renewing life is a form of work, a kind of production, as fundamental to the perpetuation of society as the production of things (Laslett and Brenner 1989: 382-383).

This work of “renewing life”—the reproduction of human beings—is systematically devalued the more that capitalist relations of production mold childrearing to the dictates of reproducing *laborers*. These laborers that women give birth to and rear contribute to the self-valorization of capital by producing ever more surplus-value for capitalists who own the vast majority of society’s means of production (Marx 1976 [1867]: 644).

Socialist feminists have long noted how women’s unwaged work in the household perpetuates an entire social system by rendering the capitalist mode of production possible. They have insisted that “[w]hether physical or ideological, reproductive work is generative in nature, often seems to be located in the domestic sphere or household, is not monetarily rewarded, and is gendered female” (Withers 2009). Such an approach defines *societal reproduction* in terms of the perpetuation of an entire social system based on an unequal division of labor between men and women, together with socially constructed ideas about the cultural significance of biological sex categories.
Other scholars refer to “reproduction” more narrowly as women’s unwaged community and household labor. Both of these approaches are useful for interpreting the course of power relations at different scales: that of the national society and that of its most basic social unity, the household. In her later work on gender and globalization, sociologist Joan Acker argued that gender ideologies and processes are built into globalized capitalism due to how states and corporations have recently succeeded in privatizing and externalizing reproductive services. This can be seen in their ever more obstinate denials of responsibility for day care and health care—offloading this cost onto households and women. These relatively recent changes in the global economy “reinforce the underlying gender divisions between production and reproduction and the gendered understructure of capitalist production” (Acker 2004: 27).

Structural adjustment policies in countries of the global periphery and semiperiphery further disrupt social reproduction for masses of people, which in turn exacerbates the pressures upon women to “keep life going” with their unpaid labor (Cabezas, Reese and Waller 2015). In one relevant example connecting reproduction at the household level with the macro level, Silvia Federici (e.g. 2009) relates the re-organization of reproduction and of class relations to the restructuring of the world capitalist economy of the past four decades. Through “neoliberal” policies that 1) doubled the size of the world labor market in the 1990s, 2) de-regulated capital, 3) disinvested in the reproduction of the work force (i.e. through dismantling of welfare states and social safety nets), and 4) increased exploitation of cheap natural resources, capital accumulation has recovered from its global crisis of the 1970s. Of these trends,
the fourth seems most relevant to environmental justice movements in rural areas. Debt repayment/structural adjustment programs have led countries like Mexico to “expropriate/privatize immense tracts of lands…and make them available for mineral extraction” (Federici 2009: 8). “Third World” societies have essentially been forced to “divert food production from the domestic to the export market,” partly by converting “arable land from the production of edible crops to mineral extraction” (Federici 2009: 10) and other extractive activities that are being heralded by Mexico’s recent Special Economic Zones, for example.

The end result is that structural adjustment programs (and the “megaprojects” that accompany them to pay off national debts) have impinged upon the gendered reproduction of life, households, communities and rural/indigenous regions. In Federici’s words, these policies have “lengthened women’s workday and returned work to the home,” such that women in much of the Global South must now “spend more time fetching water, obtaining and preparing food, and dealing with illnesses that are far more frequent at a time when the marketization of healthcare has made visits to clinics unaffordable, and malnutrition and environmental destruction have increased vulnerability to disease” (Federici 2009: 13).

The diminishing household resources brought about by this intersection of institutional violence and environmental violence are also associated with a rise in violence against women. For example, Federici (2009: 13) suggests that “many men also use women’s bodies through prostitution as a means of exchange and a path of access to the world market.” Even more recently, Gamlin and Hawkes (2018) have interpreted the
ongoing homicide epidemic in Mexico’s most marginalized regions as a violent quest to regain lost manhood under conditions of pauperization and extreme inequality.

This disturbing panorama shows how global capitalism has “saved itself” from its prior contradictions and crises by further devaluing subsistence work as well as by increasing its access to raw materials. Jason Moore’s use of the term “cheap nature” (e.g. Moore 2015) denotes how the appropriation of unpaid labor (not just exploited wage labor by the working class or by female homemakers, but also the exploitation of ecological services, animals, slaves, and biomass has been historically foundational to capital accumulation for centuries: “A determination of socially necessary labor time occurs simultaneously through organizational and technical innovation and through strategies of appropriating the unpaid work/energy of women, nature and colonies” (Moore 2015: 54). These sources of value are “external” to capitalist production and externalized by it.

These examples illustrate how the concept of reproduction is materially and intellectually central to wage labor, gender and the family. Reproduction in the macro societal sense must also be extended to encompass (non-human) nature and what Moore calls “colonies.” Indigenous and/or agrarian communities are one of the many sites where neocolonial relations between center and periphery are reproduced and resisted. However, less scholarly attention has been placed on how gender roles are negotiated and changed by indigenous women and men in the process of defending communal reproduction against capital, especially in regions like the Tehuantepec Isthmus known for its unusual gender relations. Similar to Moore’s questioning of the typical
“society/nature” binary, Bennholdt-Thomsen (2008: 241) has previously suggested that subsistence production should not be seen as separate from social reproduction, because “housewives on the one hand and peasants (both men and women) on the other…both reproduce labor power for capital but are not compensated by capital.”

Women have been forced by neoliberal circumstances and by patriarchal customs to take up additional burdens to support their families in the face of the systematic devaluing and commodification of subsistence work. Informally through their daily activities, as well as more formally and consciously through their participation in social movements, “women have helped their communities to avoid total dispossession, to extend budgets, and to add food to the kitchen pots” (Federici 2009: 15). Women are also acting to block the appropriation of land for mining and other extractive projects in Latin America.

The structural position of Isthmus *campesinos* and fishermen (through subsistence food production) and their wives (through unpaid domestic work that adds value to these raw commodities) contribute to reproducing class relations and surplus value on a societal scale. Mexico’s recent energy overhaul (Castillo Mussot et al 2018) and the reforms to its Mining Law have intensified this incorporation of communal lands and indigenous communities into globalized circuits of accumulation, while undermining the social reproduction of these communities and what has traditionally been their communal ownership of nature. Not incidentally, many indigenous groups (though not all indigenous feminists) view nature as a feminized “mother earth.” While rather idealized, this notion can propel and legitimate contemporary indigenous activism because it views
nature as more ontologically knit with “society,” unlike typical Western categories of thought that view nature as something external to humans.

As the Mexican state has been pursuing economic growth by “dispossessing” state and communal properties (Harvey 2003) to promote more intensive resource extraction, gender relations and rural territories have become new cultural and political battle grounds. Campesino families, poor rural strata, and their lands in general are being converted more fully into what Jason Moore calls “cheap nature.” The countryside absorbs surplus capital in raw materials that then heightens the profitability of industrial production. For example, the massive wind energy projects on Oaxaca’s coast that were installed cheaply on arable communal farmlands now provide “green” renewable energy to major production hubs controlled by transnational corporations in other parts of Mexico. In eco-territorial conflicts, the locus of struggle is not the workplace, but the community and its territory, where movements refuse to allow capital to displace and dispossess.

Just as various authors have charged that commodity chain analysis (e.g. Gereffi 1993) neglects to consider how the global economy conceals gender inequalities at all levels due to women’s unpaid reproductive and productive labor, socio-environmental mobilization in the Tehuantepec Isthmus cannot help but implicate households, bodies and the reproduction thereof. World-systems feminist scholar Wilma Dunaway powerfully points out that a given commodity chain won’t be understood sociologically unless we “investigate how the complicated, messy details of people’s everyday lives are intertwined with it” (Dunaway 2013: 17). The same is true for resistance movements
based in indigenous communities: the “messy details” of people’s personal lives
(particularly their identities and positions within a hierarchical social space) differentially
impact people’s motivation and ability to resist the way that these very commodity chains
externalize nature and marginalize women. Whereas Dunaway (2013) calls for an
analysis of how households help subsidize commodities through women’s hidden labor, I
am interested in how gendered interactions at the household and community level are
interpreted and acted upon by movement participants (and supporters).

Due to people’s cultural and material connections to the land, the
“environmentalism of the poor” (e.g. Martinez Alier 2003) practiced by many Latin
American communities in resistance is intensely place-based (Altamirano Jimenez 2003: 43). Servando, one of the campesino respondents I profile in the following chapter,
captures this well when he justifies his anti-mining activism by citing his rootedness to
Iztepec’s land: “We don’t have any other land to go to. This is our space. [If it becomes
unlivable], where else would we go?” But campesinos of Servando’s generation tend to
not acknowledge the extent to which place-based concerns about bodily health,
households, and land ownership are gendered: that is, they are colored by socially
produced meanings about the relative roles of the masculine and the feminine, and they
are further embedded in unequal class relations that are shaped by states and globalized
investment flows. For this reason, not everyone experiences place in the same way. To
understand how place-based notions of ethnic and communal identity motivate anti-
extractive activism, we need to pay attention to the historical material context in which
indigeneity has been constructed. Once again, this context includes the contested gender
relations in indigenous communities themselves (Altamirano Jimenez 2013: 49). In the context of how capitalist economic restructuring “absorbs, pollutes, or destroys too much of a society’s ecological and social resources” (Dunaway 2014: 5) and threatens the collective reproduction of life, the diverse life experiences of politicized Isthmus women can illuminate when, why, and in what form gender questions can become part and parcel of an anti-systemic environmental justice struggle.

It is ultimately true that global production networks “threaten social reproduction of households and communities and often trigger resistance” (Dunaway 2014: 24). However, inequalities are perceived and experienced (and resistance, if it is “triggered” at all, takes place) through people’s lived standpoints and identities. This mirrors the way that mobilization occurs through inherited, evolving cultural codes and understandings, as spoken to in the previous chapter. Subjectivities are embedded within a contradictory social structure. The Isthmus has its own gender norms, but there is no ironclad value consensus about gender that is spread evenly throughout society, as functionalist “sex role theory” once assumed (Parsons 1936). As local norms and economic relationships are impacted by Mexico’s further commodification of land and resources, “resistance” emerges unevenly, and different actors may feel the need to resist different things. Close ethnographic attention to several communities from which opposition to the Special Economic Zone has been developing can help guard against deterministic macro analyses (whereby forms of inequality or grievances are assumed to simply “trigger” resistance), and also to avoid romanticizing a spontaneous, universal, feminine revolutionary subjectivity.
For instance, is it truly “women” who most squarely stand in the way of the total commodification of life and who are on the front lines of this process, as Silvia Federici (e.g. 2009) seems to suggest? If so, which women, and under what conditions? Which kinds of economic, familial and cultural barriers might indigenous women face in becoming a conscious, organized part of this resistance? With which motivations, and through which organizational methods, do women on the ground participate in the “re-appropriation and re-collectivization of reproduction” (Federici 2009: 16)? Frameworks that tend to homogenize women as inherently involved in communal resistance seem to also essentialize the feminine as being closer to “nature” than the masculine. Instead, the extent to which women view their own activism as a way to obstruct the reproduction of an exploitative and patriarchal world-system, is an empirical question.

Among social justice activists, essentialist theories tend to translate into a political practice that naturalize women’s supposed core identity as nurturers, mothers, or caregivers, and demands greater value for this care work. As an example, Benhabib (1996: 20) believes that the fracturing and dissolution of subjectivity celebrated by some poststructural feminists such as Judith Butler would “eliminate not only the specificity of feminist theory but place in question the very emancipatory ideals of the women's movement altogether.” Others challenge this essentialism by welcoming a destabilizing and deconstructionist approach to gender. Monique Wittig (1993) once argued that one is not born a woman. For her, the ultimate goal of feminism should be to eliminate sex and gender as categories—for women to go out of existence, just as overthrowing capital for Marx meant that the proletariat as a class should ultimately wither away.
This is more than just an arcane academic dispute. Among female activists I have interviewed, and even among those who consider themselves feminists, anti-essentialist as well as essentialist positions seem to be apparent. Both of these perspectives have currency among women who are mobilizing to defend indigenous territory, and both can even coexist as contradictory or conflicting motivations for the same person.

To make sense of this complexity and contraditoriness apparent in the gender ideologies of this Mesoamerican social movement community, I apply “the Marxian insight that material reality exists prior to conception,” a perspective that is “thoroughly materialist and social” (Knehans 2007: 237). I see multiple intersecting and complex identities not solely as a product of discourse (as in the Foucauldian tradition) but in the contradictory social circumstances and discourses that subjects are grounded in, affected by, interpreting, and continually transforming.

It is undeniable that different Marxian theorists hold many different conceptions of subjectivity, and that there are also an incredible breadth of feminist views of subjectivity and agency. These literatures are too vast to summarize here. In general, I agree with poststructuralist (and intersectional, or “standpoint”) feminism on one specific point: Assuming unitary female experiences and meta-forms of “gender oppression” can perpetuate other inequalities (such as race, sexuality, class, or ability) while overgeneralizing and reifying “women” as a self-explanatory category. Specific forms of domination are historically evolved and must be dealt with in their changingness as well as in their concreteness.
From this perspective, the following chapter examines how men and women tend
to experience gender, how their activism reinforces gender categories, and how they seek
to change gender inequality as they work for social and environmental justice in the Isthmus.
CHAPTER V
Mines, “Matriarchy,” and “Mother Earth”: Gendered Resistance in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec

INTRODUCTION

In a region renowned for relatively more egalitarian gender relations, environmental justice activism reproduces the socially produced masculinities and femininities that predominate in this region. But this movement for defense of indigenous territory and livelihoods also is also creating a space in which some gendered norms are being questioned. In order to defend territorial and cultural autonomy against the threats of global capitalist projects, indigenous organizations often draw on how Isthmus Zapotec women are “associated with public space, with community planning, and with cultural survival in the face of national and international threats to local autonomy” (Taylor 2006: 822). By analyzing some respondents’ divergent views about the gender order in the Isthmus and about the role of women in social movements, this chapter illustrates how gender acts as a fundamental axis social difference in an indigenous region whose communities are said to be “matriarchal.”

Men and women can voice quite different takes on how gender affects their lives and their political participation. I found this discrepancy to be sharpest when comparing the view of more elderly men to those of younger women. The three older men I profile in this chapter express perspectives that typified the sentiments I tended to hear from activist male respondents who tend to have come of age in the 1970s. These men come from different social classes. Ethnically, two are Zapotec and one is Mestizo. They are regular participants in environmental justice efforts in Ixtepec. They all argue that
women’s role is “fundamental” in Isthmus society and within the movement itself. According to this view, there are still “vestiges” of machismo, but these are being phased out as women take their rightful place among men as equals. These older men celebrate women’s agency in Isthmus society, including in the social movements, in a way that would perhaps be unusual for their counterparts in the rural United States or in Northern Mexico where the patriarchy is more hegemonic. When mentioning how they see threats to women today, these men from Ixtepec discuss “extractivism” as a mode of development that despoils nature for the benefit of an elite few, but they do not directly discuss sexualized violence and machismo.

Female respondents—irrespective of some important social and demographic differences among them—are more likely to expound on their experiences with “hidden violence” in their families, occupations, community festivals, and within political movements. To show this, I present interview data from five women: three who are fully involved in grassroots activism, and two who are very supportive of this activism but who are more focused on their own economic survival than on being movement/forum organizers. Of the three “activists,” two are Zapotecs from Ixtepec while one is Zoque from San Miguel Chimalapa. These women’s level of formal education ranges considerably, from some college to Masters degrees in social sciences. While all three “activists” are against mines and the Special Economic Zone, their political and cultural activism stretches beyond anti-mining advocacy to gender-based organizing. The other two women are Zapotec, from Ixhuatán and Zanatepec. They have close social ties to
people who are more regularly involved in anti-mining work in the Isthmus, and these
two women join such efforts whenever their personal lives allow for it.

This serves to update previous research on how gender has taken expression in the
militant social movements of the Isthmus. For example, Jeffrey Rubin’s key political
history of the COCEI points to the discrepancy in which “COCEI’s male leaders claimed
a feminism that was at odds with women’s actual social and political roles” within the
organization (Rubin 1997: 232). Rubin’s work made tremendous contributions to the
political history of the COCEI, but he did not systematically examine the experiences and
perspectives of female COCEI supporters or of other activist women from Juchitán.

There is now a new generation of women who cite sexism as the reason they are forming
and joining feminist collectives. Some of the respondents in this chapter born in the
1980s and early 1990s are daughters of COCEI members. Though they were too young to
have leadership roles in the early COCEI, these women are organizing to address what
they see as the continuity between COCEI’s early machismo and sexism in today’s
activist scene around Juchitán.

Examining the diverse social trajectories and testimonies within this sample of
Isthmus activists (N= 8) helps build a bridge to the established scholarship on the gender
relations within Juchitán and within the COCEI itself, particularly key works by Chiñas
(1992), Campbell (1994), and Rubin (1997). Using a more explicit anticolonial,
materialist-feminist lens than these aforementioned scholars, I show how contemporary
pan-indigenous activists in the Istmo “do gender” in ways that both resemble and contrast
with radical movements of the previous generation. Just as feminist movements in the
non-Western world were pushed by political circumstances to ally with or join national liberation struggles in the recent past (Gilmartin 1995: 6-7), Isthmus movements for territory and cultural autonomy are increasingly compelled to contend with feminism. I identify two main themes from my data around this question:

- First, I find that questions about gendered power and sexual violence have mostly been taken up within separate, feminist collectives who work parallel to anti-mining organizations and to agrarian units. Indigenous feminist collectives or “women’s groups” uphold the defense of collective territorial rights, but they simultaneously organize at a distance from these larger (co-gendered) groups.

- Second, feminized values of maternal connection to the environment and to “life” are mutually shared across many social actors of Isthmus culture in ways that seem more progressive than the everyday values and ideologies found in U.S. male-dominant culture. Nevertheless, older Zapotec men more often lack consciousness of how poverty, micro-aggressions, and cultural customs might dissuade women from certain kinds of political participation. This lack of awareness resembles that of their male counterparts outside of the Istmo, in most other patriarchal societies. Popular cultural notions among Isthmus Zapotecs still appear to see women’s political activism as an extension of their domestic and reproductive roles, which are taken for granted by these men. These men work with social movement organizations that sincerely rally to the protection of “Mother Earth” against “projects of death.” But to the extent that gender inequality is not acknowledged as a structural question of power, movement
organizations can also reinforce the gender stratification that work against women’s life chances. Towards the end of this chapter, I speak to how this data enhances our general understanding about gendered organizations within indigenous and socio-environmental movements.

ANALYTICAL CHOICES

All of the activists I interviewed contribute in their own important ways to the struggle for social and environmental justice. But the decision to devote more pages of this chapter to women (in their own words and talking about their own lives) was political. Indigenous women in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, like indigenous women everywhere, take risks to speak out against and confront patriarchy in today’s climate of fear and resurgent misogyny.

In collecting, assembling, and arranging this data, I highlight women’s diverse political analyses out of a conscious choice to counter-balance the historic ways in which men have failed to reckon with what women experience, and how we have overlooked the substance of their own intellectual/political reflections. The voices of women in rural towns who protest unequal gender roles are not always accessible. Publications and forums for indigenous rights in Oaxaca either use gender-neutral frameworks that omit discussion of gender altogether, or they proffer idealized motifs that sing the praises of

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22 At the same time, to replicate the flow of the conversations I had around the complex subject of gender, this chapter reports all interview data in the form of extended personal narratives. I feel this format best illustrates “individual perspective[s] and expression[s] of an event, experience, or point of view” (Madison 2005: 26).
matriarchy and of women’s central roles, without fully giving voice to the complexity of
gendered meanings in activists’ lives.

Oaxaca’s governor Alejandro Murat issued what he called a “Gender Alert” in
August of 2018 for 40 of Oaxaca’s municipalities, but feminist groups like the
Consortium for Parliamentary Dialogue and Equity (Consorcio Para el Diálogo
Parlamentario y la Equidad, http://consorciooaxaca.org.mx) accuse the state government
of allowing femicides to worsen under its watch. The month of November 2018 saw eight
women murdered in Oaxaca, while women’s groups in Oaxaca document that some 238
women have been assassinated since Governor Murat took power two years prior
(Luciana 2018). Nationally, under the presidential term of Enrique Peña Nieto (December
2012 through November 2018), the security of women seems to have deteriorated
markedly. The National Citizen’s Observatory of Femicides (Observatorio Ciudadano
Nacional del Feminicidio) registered 12,796 women killed in Mexico, but only decided to
investigate 22 percent of those as femicides (Matias 2018).

These numbers hardly capture the avalanche of other indignities women and girls
go through under capitalist patriarchy. As I was beginning to draft this chapter in the fall
of 2019, I read that a group of a couple dozen women symbolically took the steps of
Oaxaca’s Ministry of Justice (Fiscalía General de Oaxaca) in San Antonio de la Cal to
denounce the state government’s negligence and perpetuation of femicides. They then
marched to Oaxaca’s Palace of Government demanding justice for survivors.

One of the female respondents in this chapter had encountered this same
demonstration in front of the Ministry of Justice on November 25, the International Day
for the Elimination of Violence Against Women (“#N25”) by chance as she was on her way to a store. She was pleased to see the rally, she was having a very difficult day. She said she was tired of responding to vicious tirades from a male classmate on Facebook and WhatsApp who was saying “feminazis” like her were merely overhyping the issue of femicides in Mexico. Then, a male stranger at the corner store grabbed her face to give her an unwanted kiss. This anecdote viscerally depicts how the half of humanity that is female “will be routinely demeaned, deceived, degraded, and all too often brutalized by those who are supposed to be their most intimate lovers” (Avakian 2011: 7).

Differentially Gendered Experiences and Worldviews

Participants in this social movement community have different interpretations of their own culture (and of how territory is to be defended) based on a combination of their own class, gender, and biographical/political experience. The atypical matrifocal culture of this region serves as a discursive reference point for the area’s co-gendered anti-mining activism, as well as its budding feminist collectives. Both campesinos and feminists position their political claims within embedded cultural narratives of indigenous women’s strength. But young feminists do so with a more critical eye towards these very cultural norms. Their willingness to challenge some of these inherited cultural understandings flows from their lived experiences with different forms of sexism, as well the access that some of these women have had to several different schools of feminist theory.
“Without women there is no life”: Men’s views on women’s political involvement

In this first section, I provide evidence from my research to show that while most men in the movement are highly supportive rhetorically of women’s equality, it is not uncommon for them to view gender in essentialist terms.

In November of 2016, the Comité Ixtepecano Vida Territorio held a meeting at Ixtepec’s local agrarian cooperative. Ixtepec’s Zapotec cultural roots were emphasized by many of the speakers who railed against government plans to bring mining projects to Ixtepec, and talk about defending “mother earth” from “the extractivist model of development” was widely embraced by both men and women. Given the potent legacy of women’s involvement in previous struggles, I was interested in what progressive men in the movement thought about women’s roles in this community and in this movement today. A leader of the Comité with whom I had been staying introduced me to two older men that were open to talking with me about why they support the Comité, and about this specific question of gender roles and ideologies. Raymundo and Gerardo were both professionals—they were engineers who worked in construction. Raymundo identified as Zapoteco auténtico (authentic Zapotec). His much taller and lighter-skinned friend said he was “obviously not 100% Zapotec” but that he felt connected to Zapotec culture through his grandmother, and to Ixtepec through his years of living in the community. Though they were careful to say that they are not members of the Comité, they are partisan to the local anti-mine movement and collaborate with members of the Comité.23

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23 As a testament of this commitment: after the earthquake of September 2017, both men volunteered their time and skills to help lead disaster relief efforts alongside the Comité, in opposition to what they saw as the government’s corrupt neglect of humanitarian needs in the Isthmus.
Raymundo and Gerardo each expressed strong support for women’s right and duty to participate in the movement and in politics, and both of them also believed that machismo had greatly diminished over the past several decades. Gerardo claimed that women have become increasingly participatory because

Today there is greater consciousness about the value of women’s social action. Instead of telling their husbands ‘you go ahead to the meeting, I’ll support you,’ the women are more socially conscious of how important it is for them to be present, to go with the man and to even go ahead of the man because if not, there won’t be change...women’s rights greatly influence whether there will be changes on a global level and in society. I think women have become more conscious of this.

Raymundo agreed with this, stressing that he saw this as a positive development. He believes this was influenced by women’s greater professional training and a change in consciousness that women have undergone in their daily lives. Like most men I spoke to about this question, Raymundo thought that the inferior treatment given to women was “very palpable and tangible” in previous generations, but that women today had made great strides towards equity:

They were only accepted as objects that had to remain in the house, doing manual work and other reproductive activities, you could say. Now women’s educational, academic and professional training has been increasing. You find women throughout all engineering and science departments, especially here in the Isthmus.

Gerardo went further to say that this kind of “liberalism” with regards to women’s autonomy flourishes in the Isthmus more so than other regions of Oaxaca, and probably even more than much of the world. He added that while women have always partaken in politics, and that their participation has gradually increased, he attributes this change to
more structural forces, including mining companies, that threaten existing ways of life in the region:

Conditions of life have changed in the past generation. Before, life was more tranquil, you didn’t have as many problems. Women basically stayed at home, but they worked, they produced, they organized the family and sometimes they made many decisions in the family sphere… At least in Ixtepec and in the Isthmo, we weren’t subjected to what we’re experiencing now. Society is breaking down because of modern life, which has been penetrating and affecting the community. I think it’s also due to this that women feel an impetus to act in defense of a culture and a life that previously was not so problematic…She has become more active because the problems are ever more severe. Fifty years ago, no one would have thought that a mine would come here—people lived happily. So social problems have pushed women to get more involved…it’s in women’s instinct to take care of life. It’s in women’s collective unconscious that she needs to act.

Women may indeed feel the need to act “in defense of a culture and a life,” because “the problems are more severe” than they were one generation ago, such as economic restructuring that adversely affects women. At least according to Gerardo, the arrival of mining concessions is symptomatic of capital-intensive industries that have adverse effects on local women’s ability to raise households. This point is similar to Moghadam’s now classic (1999) analysis of female labor and globalization, where she says “It should come as no surprise that the massive entry of women into the work force around the world, whether as professionals or as proletarians, has coincided with the political mobilization of women and the expansion of women’s organizations of all types” (378). In the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, more women are employed in white collar or lower middle class occupations, but gender ideologies continue to define roles of men and women, including the value of their labor.
I pressed on, asking whether these men believed that women had a stronger ecological consciousness than men. Gerardo answered:

Women have always taken care of resources, the home and health. So I think that yes, the woman has this more conscious idea of the environment than us (men). We are influenced by a macho culture that discards, that wastes.

Raymundo extended this biological essentialism even further:

I think women have always stood for the defense of life because she’s carrying this fruit inside of her…it’s basically instinctive. A woman sees that ‘this will harm my children’ and at that moment, she stands up to any threats.

Gerardo readily agreed:

Women have this function…this relevant role. Without women there is no life because women give birth. Of course this requires the participation of the man, but who carries the principal weight? The woman. Here for example, a single woman is never looked down on. Mother Earth generates life, and this is the source of women’s maternal instinct of equity. (“To defend and protect” added Raymundo). This instinct is not limited to the Isthmus, it’s universal. The woman is the mother.

These viewpoints are interesting for several reasons. Gerardo and Raymundo denote an appreciation for how mounting inequalities and political turmoil have made women more conscious of the need for openly political action, and they welcome that development.

But they tend to not acknowledge women’s contemporary struggles with sexism, discrimination and violence in the Isthmus. Also, while making many plausible assumptions about women’s supposed newfound consciousness, these men had little to say about whether their own consciousness, or that of their male peers, had undergone any transformation on issues of patriarchy.
In December 2016, I conducted an interview with Servando, an older campesino activist and member of Ixtepec’s campesino assembly who is also closely aligned with the Comité Ixtepecano. Servando elaborated on agrarian property relations in this coastal plain of the Isthmus, the intersection of the anti-mining movement with indigenous collective identity, and the stories he has heard about how mining projects have ruined other pueblos all over Mexico. When I asked him what role women should play in the efforts to stop gold mines from opening in Ixtepec, his answers resembled those of Raymundo and Gerardo:

Women are part of the movement throughout the whole country. Without women, no movement has ever triumphed. They have to be involved because this is also their patrimony, and they play a very important role.

Returning to the charged and culturally relevant theme of Isthmus “matriarchy,” I asked Servando if he saw gender relations in the Isthmus as contrasting with those in other places.

Yes, the level of politicization is greater here. The repression that women suffer from men in other regions makes it so that they don’t protest. Women’s involvement has been forced beneath the surface in other regions due to this, but our region is very different…Discrimination does exist here, but women are more participatory, due to their economic independence. The tendency is for them to ditch husbands that are bad.

Slightly different than the former two respondents, Servando sees Isthmus women’s increasing political involvement as owing to their “economic independence” that women in other regions lack. Servando continued by offering an example of how it is accepted for women to work in the rural sector as equals:

We have compañeras that are partners in the ranching cooperative. And they’re indigenous, they speak an autochthonous language [i.e. Zapotec], they’re from the pueblo here and they run their own production units. At
assemblies, they have the same rights to participate as men (*el mismo voto y voz*) and they’re respected.

I could not directly verify Servando’s assertions about *campesinas* being treated with respect by their male peers who greatly outnumber them in the formal sphere of rural “production.” But I heard these remarks repeated in other interviews, in similar tones of pride and approval, from several other *campesinos* in nearby Zanatepec. Notably, the youngest *campesino* I interviewed was in his late 40s, and most were perhaps two decades older. This reflects a larger reality that small and medium-sized independent farmers on communal lands are an aging group, as youth tend to leave rural areas or opt for more “professional” careers in the face of stagnation in the countryside.

These men in the movement are quite supportive of the idea of women taking prominent roles in the indigenous and environmental movements, but they mostly view equality as an accomplished fact, and not as a goal whose achievement will require significant organizational resources and political battles. These views contrast with those of younger Isthmus female activists, as discussed more fully below.

*Indigenous female perspectives on gender relations in the Tehuantepec Isthmus*

Indigenous women activists, especially those who are younger and college educated or college bound, readily identified with indigenous culture as did male activists. These women worked with several organizations: *Preparatoria José Martí*, *Grupo Ecologista Zanatepec*, *Comité Ixtepecano Vida Territorio*, *Mujeres Istmeñas en Defensa del Territorio*, *Colectivo Mujeres en Comunidad*, *Colectivo Matza*, and *Las Nietas de los Binnigula’sa*. These women had much to say about double standards, sexual
harassment, and sexual violence that they undergo in daily life, as well as sometimes in activist spaces.

I. Paulina: “We are still exploited as women”

I begin this section by drawing from several informal conversations I had with Paulina, a then-24-year-old who previously attended high school at the Preparatoria José Martí in Ixhuatán. She remains close friends with certain teachers and alumni from the “prepa comunitaria” (radical community school) that she attended. As mentioned in Chapter III, the school is an anchor of regional opposition to the Special Economic Zone and participates actively in the APOYO coalition from an autonomist, pan-indigenist perspective.

Paulina is strongly against the idea of bringing mining to Ixhuatán, and she identifies as a feminist, but she is not a movement organizer. In the several years since she graduated high school, Paulina has worked in social service and volunteer positions in various communities without a college degree. Her family splits their time between Ixhuatán and the gritty industrial city of Coatzacoalcos, Veracruz on the northern side of the Isthmus, where her father works seasonally in the oil industry. To save money for the education degree she will now be working towards in a Oaxacan university, Paulina worked at a shoe store in Coatzacoalcos where the female boss paid workers in cash on a weekly basis, but often demanded that the workers put in longer hours than what was

24 The quotes I offer from this respondent are not based on recorded interviews, which is why Paulina does not appear in the Appendix of Formal Interviews. Instead, these quotes were drawn with her permission from face to face conversations and subsequent follow-up over email.
promised. According to Paulina, the store owner also had her own security guards. This seemed to give her impunity to violate Mexico’s already weak labor laws.

When she was back in Ixhuatán, Paulina tried working in the formal sector at the local grocery store, but the process of acquiring work permits and the inflexible training hours that did not allow her to go to Oaxaca City to apply for school were untenable. Because of this, and due to not having a degree and the qualifications necessary for salaried employment, she opted to work under the table packaging and selling cheeses for a local businesswoman in Ixhuatán. As the woman (like her former boss at the shoe warehouse) also felt entitled to hire Paulina as a housekeeper and nanny for minimum wage, she noted the irony that this woman had studied at a leftist rural teacher’s college years ago, and now has the ability to hire labor and buy opulent huipiles (embroidered dresses symbolizing Zapotec femininity) from Juchitán. She would often work 10-hour days for this woman for at most 150 pesos per day ($8) because she had no other options for steady work in her own town.

Instead of taking facets of Isthmus life like fiestas (and women’s involvement in them) for granted as proud symbols of how Zapotec matriarchy has endured over centuries, Paulina questions the ways in which the unequal distribution of labor and rewards pivot around both social class and gender. This critique is based on her social experiences as a daughter of working class parents, and is likely influenced by the radical communitarian lens that the activist teachers at the Prepa José Martí had imparted on her while she was in high school. She tells me:

I’ve been thinking about matriarchy and I’ve become more convinced that it’s a lie. Maybe it’s true that we have certain freedoms, but we are still
exploited as women. *Certain* women are the ones who have the privileges. This ‘empowerment’ is supposedly given to Ístméñas as if we were the center of everything, but it’s not like that—we’re slaves. Like in fiestas (town parties), who organizes them and works a shitload? Well, it’s the women…we have a ton of work, but it’s not seen like this. On the contrary, people say ‘women here are such hard workers’ (‘Ay, las Ístméñas son muy trabajadoras!’) while men who work a lot are told that they resemble women (‘a los hombres que trabajan mucho ya hasta les dicen ‘parece mujer!’’)

In the above quote, Paulina differentiates between the handful of more privileged women who hire young female day laborers like her for minimum-wage domestic work, and the great majority who work in precarious positions or voluntarily, especially when a fiesta demands hours of volunteer labor. In fact, this is where I first became acquainted with Paulina: after waking up at 4:30am, I went to a woman’s house in Ixuatan with a group of teachers from the Prepa José Martí school and their friends to assist with food preparation for the yearly February 2nd fiesta de la candelaria that was being held that same afternoon. The men who joined this volunteer endeavor were young teachers and students from the Prepa, and they were outnumbered by the women, who seemed to take up the cooking tasks more cheerfully and with more lighthearted chit-chat. This quasi-ritual is called *la ayuda* (the help), and like Paulina says, it is very feminized. The bountiful cases of beer and cash donations for the fiesta tend to be more provided by the men in the community, while the early-morning preparation of hundreds of diced tomatoes, onions, sausages and other botanas (finger foods) is a collective feminine task.

In fact, the previous quotes from men praising the centrality of women to the movement, and to nurturing “life,” as well as the glowing comments Paulina experienced about Isthmus women’s exceedingly positive “work ethic,” can be likened to what the
social psychological literature calls *benevolent sexism*. Unlike hostile acts of sexism, which express antipathy toward women, benevolent sexism engages in flattery (Glick and Fiske 1995) while contributing to the maintenance of gender inequalities by conveying gender stereotypes in a “positive” tone.

Yet, the indigenous context of the Tehuantepec Isthmus is not a perfect fit for the concept of benevolent sexism. For example, Barreto and Ellemers (2005) argue that benevolent sexism emphasizes how women deserve “protective paternalism” and how they are useful for fulfilling men’s sexual needs. In the Isthmus, this may be less applicable, since it is a relatively acceptable norm for women to be fierce and to be quite open about their sexual lives. This is not to say all women conform to those stereotypes, but the fact that these patterns and standards are more or less acknowledged suggest that gender relations and benevolent sexism in Oaxaca’s Isthmus play out rather differently than they would in Europe or the United States. The one element of benevolent sexism that strongly and repeatedly asserts itself in the Isthmus is that of “complementary gender differentiation (e.g. the belief that women have—typically domestic—qualities that few men possess)” (Barreto and Elemers 2005: 634).

To give just one of the examples where movement organizations and households engaged in “complementary gender differentiation” backed by gender essentialism, Gerardo and Raymundo believe that women had a “feminine instinct” to “take care of the home” and be good (albeit strong) mothers. According to many progressive men in the indigenous movement, these qualities make women better movement leaders than males, whose alleged greed and wastefulness are out of synch with nature. Even though women
were not nearly as numerous as men in speaking and intellectual leadership positions, benevolent sexism tends to justify this inequality by saying that women are defending territory simply by engaging in reproductive work in the household and in the community. Although Zapotec male activists may be sincere in this position, this persistent social platitude functions as a form of blandishment that reinforces men’s dominant role as movement strategists. This view among men assumes that women’s everyday roles of taking care of the home and looking after children are movement activism—at least until women are urgently needed on the “front line.” In such times of crisis, women are expected to come rumbling into the public sphere to put their bodies on the line, just as they did during the battles against the brief French occupation of Juchitán, which was defeated on September 5, 1866 with the involvement of women (Martínez López 1966).

Again, benevolent sexism in the Zapotec context is conditioned by a larger historical system of patriarchal domination. I extrapolate from Paulina’s testimony (and from the four following respondents as well) to argue that an indigenous form of benevolent sexism holds women back from being able to take full-time leadership roles in social movements, since the trope is that they are so well-placed for domestic work anyway. This kind of adulation not only takes it for granted that poorer women’s unpaid social reproduction “complements” men’s roles without subsidy. It also tends to flatten the social difference between women with a local, cultural variant of biological determinism or gender essentialism. When applied politically, the “women are natural leaders” thinking seems to uphold the handful of women in political positions of
authority “who act just as badly as men once they get into power” (as one female informant put it). At the same time, the “women are naturally domestic” line obscures how the Isthmus is a hierarchical space where affluent women have the class power to hire other women as domestics.

In one example of this, Paulina goes on to describe how she sees the matriarchal ideal as obscured by the class relations that exist among Zapotec-descended women, as well as the existing hierarchy between men (homosexual as well as heterosexual) and women:

Social differences among women are visible on our bodies, our dresses, our headdress, our gold. There are women in the fiestas with attire that costs 40,000 pesos, and others with clothes that cost 1,500. Mamps (gay men) don’t go to la ayuda. They (gay men) are at another level. Sometimes I feel [the social hierarchy] is men, muxes, and then women. But they (muxes) are not in the kitchen, they’re not decorating the fiesta—they’re hairdressers. They’re at another level.

Paulina uses mampo interchangeably with muxes. The latter are commonly understood as third-gender, biological Zapotec men who dress as females and perform feminine social roles (Mirandé 2016, Mendoza-Álvarez and Espino-Armendáriz 2018). Because I find the former term derogatory, I use the term muxes. Interestingly, although Juchitán and the surrounding Isthmus towns are celebrated for their tolerance of muxes, Paulina sees muxes as a gender that have economic power over women. This additionally complicates the simplistic idea that Juchitán is a place “where matriarchs rule.” Like her views on other gendered customs, her perspective on this emerged through having to compete with muxes for work when she was a freelance pedicurer. To supplement her informal cheese-packing job with some quicker cash, Paulina started offering pedicures to friends of her
family in Ixhuatán at 100-150 pesos per pedicure ($6-8). During the time of a fiesta, when pedicures were in high demand, she was incensed that a local muxe was charging three times that much. Paulina’s customers appeared to be willing to pay muxes higher prices for feminine-related services.

Paulina does not say these words out of homophobia, for I have heard her express adoration for her many muxes and gay male friends. Instead, her unsettling views of the social structure (and of the greater economic privileges she sees accruing to upper class women and muxes) are shaped by her struggle to survive poverty in the town itself. As a young single woman without savings or a car, she has had to accept whatever employment options are within a couple of miles of her parents’ house where she lives temporarily. In this social world, muxes can be easily seen as economic competitors, while bourgeois women may be seen as exploiters instead of fellow matriarchs.

Similarly, her questioning of local traditions does not derive from some desire to shed her indigenous roots and become Mestiza. She proudly recognizes her family as Zapotec, even though they do not fit the ideal-typical family with a dominant mother who speaks the language:

My parents and grandparents don’t speak Zapotec, but this doesn’t make me less binniza or less indigenous. Here in Ixhuatán the only thing we have is our traje (traditional dress) which we don’t even wear every day like people in Juchitán, but only when there’s a fiesta. My mother doesn’t like to sell in the market because she gets sad if someone refuses to buy. She’s timid. Here the stereotype of women who dominate the market and the economy, matriarchal women, is quickly shattered. My mother has always been a domestic worker since she was young…

This passage agrees with Saynes-Vázquez’s (1996: 188) “insider’s perspective” that “most women in Juchitán are not ‘market women,’ and most of the economic
activity in the city is not conducted in open-air markets where one class of women predominates.” Also, the open-air market only represents a small portion of the trade that goes on in Juchitán, which is overall an urban area dominated by various large businesses. Paulina’s reflection on her mother not fitting the stereotype of a typical Juchitecan woman demonstrates her sense of how such universalizing myths hide the class contradictions among women. This particularly speaks to Paulina’s own experience living within Ixhuatán’s class-divided setting, where “ricos” and “pobres” (rich and poor) even have separate, segregated fiestas throughout the year, owing to the town’s legacy of religious, political, and agrarian conflicts (Escalón Portilla and González Gaudiano 2017).

While Paulina reveres the fiesta as a space where everyone is adorned in Zapotec attire, she laments certain aspects of it. She regrets that that townspeople tend not to wear their traje in everyday life. Besides being class-divided, the fiesta for her has also been a space of awkwardness and uncomfortable sexism, where women even act as enforcers for male hegemony in the interest of maintaining the appearance of social harmony. She recounted a story of when she recently went with her parents to a fiesta in the neighboring town of Reforma de Pineda. Drained from her work week, she dressed up in her huipil hoping the beers, music and social situation would give her some respite from the alienating jobs she had been working. But, as I had observed happen at several other fiestas in Ixhuatán, she said that an older inebriated man began aggressively asking her to dance. Paulina declined a number of times. When he came at her rudely, she finally punched the man. A large argument ensued where the man’s wife verbally accosted
Paulina instead of reprimanding her husband for his drunken behavior. The other women at the party disapproved of her for “starting a fight, just like those women from Ixhuatán always do.” The man apologized to Paulina’s father, but not to her, and her parents also scolded her for being conflictual. Paulina cried and vowed to never go out to a fiesta again. She was indignant about how nobody seemed to realize that men’s sexual harassment of women is always excused in this exuberant, permissive environment.

Paulina is also outspoken, but this quality is not always embraced in local social situations. Once, while drinking and laughing loudly at a movement benefit concert (noche de bohemia) in Ixhuatán, a young man became offended when he mistakenly thought she was laughing at him. This man had been one of the main musical performers at the benefit concert. A nasty verbal argument ensued. In my interpretation, this young man acted to put her on notice that she was laughing a bit too freely and taking up too much space—even though Paulina had previously agreed to allow this out-of-town musician to sleep at her parents’ house for the night. What’s more, this outbreak took place during a social function that was organized to raise money for the local social justice school. While the event organizers dealt amiably with the issue by walking the young man home and preventing a fight, there was no major conversation that night or the following day that problematized machismo, and certainly no one shamed the man for violating the alleged matriarchal norms of Ixhuatán (he was from Chiapas). Social peace was maintained, but Paulina came away from it feeling belittled. These stories suggest that many other Isthmus women chafe under these typified micro-aggressions.
At the time, I felt that another normal night had quickly gone south due to the volatile mix of excessive beer and unquestioned patriarchy. Political activists tried to repair the breach, but they did not do so with the same analytical clarity or fervor that they apply in their speeches on defending indigenous territory from mines. The next day, the musician apologized to Paulina’s boyfriend for acting out of line, but not to Paulina. The social justice activists then went with him to the beach. Having this unfold repeatedly in the very spaces that are held in esteem for being vibrant and living symbols of Isthmus Zapotec culture (velas, fiestas) makes some Isthmenians (especially young activist women) impatient to change social norms that other community members (including many male activists) still take for granted or enact. But these women seem to be a minority—there is no open feminist organizing or collective of feminists in Ixhuatán or Zanatepec that I know of. The pro-indigenous organizations often take very progressive positions against sexism, but they are not as militant about confronting gender oppression during cultural festivities, as I discuss more fully below.

Through the remainder of this chapter, I delve further into how social movements in the Isthmus are gendered, and how activists’ inter-subjective constructions of these symbolic gender roles inform their different political strategies.

II. Angeles: “What matriarchy?”

Angeles is a single mother in her late 30s, of Zapotec origin from Zanatepec. Though she now mostly lives by Oaxaca City, she has been a supporter and participant in the Grupo Ecologista Zanatepec for three years. Alejandro, the group’s Director, is her uncle. I met Angeles through a mutual contact in Ojo de Agua Comunicacion, the media-
based NGO with which she has also worked. Angeles is a gifted singer who is sometimes hired to perform *trova* (a somber Latin folk genre) and other classic, highly emotive Isthmus songs at bars, parties, and social movement events. I got to know her by attending one of her concerts at an Isthmus-owned bar in downtown Oaxaca City. One month later, seeing that I was in her native Zanatepec on Christmas eve with no place to go, her family graciously invited me to stay and dine with them. I had previously met them after having interviewed her father (a *campesino*) about his participation in the anti-mine movement and in Zanatepec’s November 2016 mega-march against mining.

Angeles lives just outside of Oaxaca City, in the municipality of El Tule, with her two young sons. She left the Isthmus in search of economic opportunities. As we began a conversation that lasted for nearly 3 hours (first in a café, then in a park, in El Tule) while her boys played within view, she revealed that one of the reasons she could not fully make ends meet was due to how her father did not agree to loan her money as he had to her brothers.

Angeles believes that respect and equality for women have improved in the Isthmus since the previous generation, but that discrimination and machismo still persist, especially in subtle forms that are more difficult to counter. Her oral narrative of her own biography underscores a nuanced view of “matriarchy.”

The typical class background of small *ejido* families, and of women’s role in unpaid reproductive as well as productive labor, is evident in the way Angeles chose to begin narrating her upbringing:

Growing up, we were a large family of seven siblings. For my parents, it was difficult to raise us, maintain us, educate us. Because both parents
were involved in producing...my father in the fields and my mother at home, but she was always working: washing, making tortillas, or sowing the land and harvesting. She sowed there in our home’s own terrain. I always remember my mother doing something.

Like Paulina, other female respondents, and even some male respondents, I am struck by how Angeles immediately zeroes in on the role and personal character of her mother. Is this because “strong mothers” are the true center of authority in Zapotec matrilineal culture? Such a romantic interpretation might conclude that young adult daughters see their mothers’ dual participation in reproductive as well as productive labor in valiant terms because their mothers’ roles embodied competent dominion over the household. A more fitting conclusion is that this younger generation of Zapotec women see their mothers as heroines for having endured (and resisted) economic marginalization and gender inequality.

When recounting her childhood, Angeles showed awareness of class inequality when she regretted not being able to play at the hours that other kids could. At the request of her parents, her school changed her schedule to enable her to work in the morning and attend classes in the afternoon. Her mother recommended that she do this to help her aunt sell fruits and vegetables: “I had to take care of my youngest sister. I was like ‘the mom’—so little, but they made me do adult things in order to earn money.”

Today, she cares deeply about how mining would devastate the “irreplaceable river, mountains, and trees” of Zanatepec, but her precarious economic situation is a barrier to her remaining regularly involved in activism to save her pueblo from devastation. Her economic challenges are compounded by discrimination she experiences within the family. When she emigrated out of the Isthmus to raise her two kids in Oaxaca
City, she noticed that her father periodically helped her brothers resolve their economic problems—“you know, 50,000 pesos [about $3,500] for one brother, the same for the other brother…” Her brothers are married with children and living in other cities.

Angeles is trying to start a small restaurant business to bring Isthmus food and culture to customers in Oaxaca:

I’m a woman, a single mother. I only need 5,000 pesos. My father didn’t want to loan it to me. I mean, I understand, it doesn’t bother me. But this shows you the difference [in how women are treated], you know? My mother had to send me some money without my father knowing, so that I could move into a cheaper house up here with my sons. In reality, it’s the women in my family who have brought economic resources to the household, while the men have not moved up. I don’t know what’s up with them, they don’t progress, they become alcoholics…I’ve also seen this among my neighbors in the pueblo, my cousins…it’s the women who contribute more and who have more of this sense of appreciation.

I ask Angeles what she thinks about matriarchy in the Istmo and what it means to her:

Look, I’ve heard that people who aren’t from there say that the Isthmus is matriarchal, because it looks that way from outside. It looks as though women are the strongest, the providers, the ones who make decisions. But what really happens is that the man heads out to work in the fields or to fish at 4 in the morning. He returns home at 11am or noon because of the hot sun. The woman produces and transforms what he produces in order to go sell it…Then women also take some of this money to go pay all of the house bills. So men work a lot but so do women. Many of us Isthmeñass don’t believe matriarchy exists. Some French women made a documentary [Blossoms of Fire, 2000] saying matriarchy is real here, but it’s not true.25

Angeles also recounts feeling stifled when she lived at home in Zanatepec. When she would ask for permission to go somewhere, her mother would often defer to her father. Growing up, she would see how men would allow their sons to inherit their farmlands and terrain, but they would not bequeath this property to their daughters. “These types of

25 The documentary in fact interviews several Juchitán women who question the “matriarchy” label.
differences, this kind of machismo, still exists. So I ask you…what matriarchy? (Ósea por eso te digo, cual matriarcado, pues?)”

Angeles feels that women in Oaxaca’s Central Valley are more submissive, and that women in the Istmo would not put up with the “abuse” that women endure in the Valley. She believes that “in the Istmo, we still have sexist men, there is violence, but a lot of it is what’s called hidden violence (violencia oculta).” Angeles elaborates:

I’ll go to a fiesta in Zanatepec or elsewhere in the Istmo, where supposedly it’s very free, but not really. I’m very cheerful and full of laughter. So men imagine that I’m flirting with them, that I’m crazy, that kind of thing.

What Angeles calls “hidden violence” can also be seen in Paulina’s testimony about having to deal with male harassment at fiestas. In spite of how common this is throughout the Isthmus, Angeles’ move from the Isthmus to the Valley made her feel that gender hierarchies in the latter were more “extreme,” more “marked.” In response, Angeles tries to forge some sisterhood with her neighbors in El Tule:

It saddens me that women in this region [the Valley] don’t have a voice. They want to do things but their husbands won’t allow it. I’ve invited them over for sewing or exercise classes, and they tell me ‘I have to ask my husband for permission and I don’t know if he’ll let me.’

Perhaps the matriarchal ideal that she grew up around, however incomplete, has pushed Angeles to pick up on such subtleties of power, and to defend those women in other communities who have been socialized to obey men without question. While thankful to be raised in a region where women have the freedom to attend town fiestas and drink at velas, both Angeles and Paulina seemed convinced that patriarchy compounds the economic hardships faced by working class women of the Isthmus, just as they were concerned that incoming mining projects would make Isthmus society even more unequal
for the benefit of a minority. They have dealt with sexism and economic marginalization in their own *pueblo* as well as when they sought wage work in larger cities.

Next, I highlight sections of interviews I did in the Isthmus with three young women who take leading roles in multiple grassroots political and cultural organizations. They have founded groups who, unlike male-dominated agrarian cooperatives, explicitly frame the majority of their activism around gender issues.

III. Nashieli: “Machismo hides the enormous political and economic work that women generate”

Territorial activism also interpenetrates with (runs parallel to) the felt need for some women to organize *as* women. Nashieli is a Zapotec woman with some professional and academic background, though she said she learned much of her legal skills from movement organizations like Unitierra, a group founded by anthropologist Gustavo Esteva in Oaxaca City. She is among three women coordinators part of the leadership, or the *mesa de coordinacion*, for APOYO, the recently formed regional anti-mine and anti-Special Economic Zone coalition. APOYO’s three other coordinators are men. She is also involved in two women’s groups. One is the *Colectivo de Mujeres Istmeñas en Defensa del Territorio* (Collective of Isthmus Women in Defense of Territory), which was in formation at the time of our February 2017 interview and is a member of APOYO. The

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26 When this Collective was quoted in a local news article, their position on fighting multiple forms of violence (including sexism in communities) was made clear: “We firmly believe that we need to construct stronger organizations that don’t repeat or reproduce patriarchal violence of the capitalist system, which is confronting us among men, women, persons, *pueblos* and communities, when this system in its multiple manifestations is the enemy.”

“Creemos firmemente que hay que construir organizaciones mas fuertes que no repitan o reproduzcan la violencia patriarcal y machista del sistema capitalista, que nos esta enfrentando con violencia entre hombres, mujeres, personas, pueblos y comunidades, cuando el enemigo es este sistema en sus múltiples manifestaciones” (Vargas 2016)
other is a statewide organization called Colectivo Mujeres en Comunidad (Collective of Women in Community) that she participated in for six years. She says that her occupation consists of cultural management and giving workshops on women’s rights and human rights in the urbanized town of Ixtepec (where she lives) and in other smaller Isthmus communities who tend to have more conservative gender roles.

Nashieli comes from a highly politicized family. Both her parents were founders of the COCEI. Her father, who worked as an architect in the COCEI’s brief ayuntamiento popular (“popular city administration of Juchitán”), died at a young age in 1982. Her mother is an anthropologist who participates actively and regularly in the Comité Ixtepecano to stop mines from being built in Ixtepec’s communal territory. Both parents were also members of the FUP (Frente de Unidad Popular), which was Ixtepec’s more localized version of the COCEI in the 1980s, a separate but similar organization. As children, Nashieli and her brother were members of escuadron mosquito, a youth group led by the COCEI that would socialize children into the movement. Her grandparents spoke Zapotec, but she does not.

As we began to discuss why she is forming a women’s only group and whether activist women are stigmatized, she said “It would be an absurdity on my part to say that because I had the opportunity to go to school, there is not gender discrimination here.” This critical reflexivity contrasts with how male campesinos and male activists in Ixtepec told me that women’s progress and equality could be measured by the fact that many young Isthmus women have pursued professional degrees and careers. I ask Nashieli
about this image of Juchitán’s dominant women, exemplified by women’s role in fighting the French occupation militarily here in the late 1800s. She responds that the Isthmus can be seen as culturally distinct in certain forms of gender roles, but that overall, gender relations are still characterized by relations of power:

Here in the Istmo region, women live through so much machismo, and a lot of violence...Women’s role is still defined by gender relations in which women have a ‘place.’ The difference with us is that women have a more active position in commerce, which permits a certain economic independence. But as a society, we are still dragged down by machismo, just like in the whole country and all of Latin America. From my personal perspective, sometimes we also like outsiders to see us as a matriarchy—it sounds good. I think there is a part of this inside of us, but I wouldn’t define our society as matriarchy. Yes, women have some level of authority, a voice. They’re fighters, but not on the level of ‘matriarchy.’

Nashieli is in agreement with previous respondents that open misogyny (what she calls *machismo puro y duro*) is no longer socially acceptable in the Istmo. But her comments differ from those of male respondents when she argues that there are more subtle forms of “micro-machismo” that cause women strife, and that she has experienced in years of movement organizing. She says:

Often, there is such a verbal violence directed at women that is normalized, terrible, and common, and sometimes women themselves accept this...It’s like it’s once again women’s job to make sure we’re not killed as much in this society, just like it’s our job to maintain the family and to make sure we take up family planning so as to have fewer children... It’s as if to be a woman you have to give up living and become dead inside. So it’s a very subtle thing. When we say ‘we have to strengthen our cultural identity, our customs and traditions,’ we have to be very careful with that kind of thing. We have to ask which traditions and what type of cultural identity we want to strengthen. We can’t say that all of our culture is perfect and that all our customs and traditions are correct.

The first sentence of this quote is very much in line with Paulina’s experience of seeing women be complicit with men’s emotional abuse or harassment. Nashieli also struggled with how this kind of internalized oppression (e.g. David 2013, Pyke 2010) plays out in
social interactions. She connected it to the mounting femicides and violence that women are made to accept and for which they are even faulted. She feels that these issues should concern everyone, rather than being treated as women’s unique responsibility to organize against. She did not believe that women are involved in movements simply out of maternal desire to protect children and families: “I think women understand that this defense (of territory) is fundamental. We as a society should ask ourselves: to what extent are men helping women be able to participate in it?”

Here, we find an example of how someone’s life experience has shaped the way she interprets the priorities and norms of the indigenous movement. Nashieli has participated in feminist circles where she studied theory like the “communitarian feminism” (feminismo comunitario) of Bolivian scholar-activist Julieta Paredes (see Paredes 2008). She also spoke of being shamed by local gossip for being an unmarried woman who lives outside of her mother’s home and who goes out to political meetings at night. This intellectual, political and social trajectory seems to have formed the standpoint from which Nashieli speaks critically about gender norms. Similar to the stances of postcolonial feminists (e.g. Narayan 1997, Mohanty 1988), Nashieli interrogates the very ideal of “culture” with which indigenous movements frame many of their claims. Her words echo Gladys Tzul Tzul’s view that indigenous communities also transmit patriarchy, and that their movements for liberation will not be successful if gender is not foregrounded in both daily life and in political strategies:

We don’t understand that this neoliberal capitalist system, which rests on so many structures of domination, one of its pillars is patriarchy and machismo that hides the enormous political and economic work that women generate. So, when we don’t see the strength of this enormous
pillar, many men within the same resistance can be working against the system, but this over here [patriarchy]… ‘We don’t want to touch this issue.’ So I think that even within the resistance, there are many things like this to work on.

Her view that there are “things to work on within the resistance” reflects that frank discussion of gender hierarchies is still considered out of bounds. This is not essentially different than many other parts of the world, where feminism is seen as something culturally divisive or as a threat (to men, to women, tradition, etc.). In Oaxaca’s Isthmus, men extol the liberation of women in rather essentialist or maternalist terms, while women are more likely to deal with micro-aggressions and other barriers. In this way, the “pillar” of patriarchy and of women’s externalization is left standing.

IV. Josefa: “Possession is being taken of the territories and of women’s bodies”

Josefa is a younger anti-mine activist from the small mountain town of San Miguel Chimalapa, the capital of the municipality by the same name. She founded Colectivo Matza, a group of several women who organize workshops and produce a ‘zine about indigenous activism, culture and gender. She has had the opportunity to delve into Latin American studies at the college level, and recently visited Chile to produce research on the Mapuche indigenous sovereignty struggle. Her family is Zoque, not Zapotec. This and her rootedness in the eastern side of the Isthmus puts her outside of the geographical and cultural boundaries of Isthmus matriarchy, a (disputed) culture which is centered around Juchitán. Still, her impressions and experiences on how ethnicity, class and gender affect her own organizing echoes the more critical perspectives of the three former women respondents. Like Nashielí, her father was in the COCEI. He works an indigenous language instructor at the local public school, is an active member of the teacher’s union,
and opposes the mining projects that are slated for Zoque territory in the nearby Chimalapa mountains.

At one point, Josefa explained why she saw violence against women as a tool of the state to control this stretch of territory and why conservative gender norms both in movement organizations and in communities held regional human rights organizations back from answering this threat. She detailed how there had been a series of bus hijackings on a local stretch of highway around the same time that the region had begun organizing against mines. She said that armed men board buses to kidnap and rape women, and that perhaps some women in her town had been victims:

This doesn’t seem isolated to me. It’s a tactic…a form of hidden violence...The pueblos (communities) themselves are machista (patriarchal)...So it’s more difficult to denounce (these highway rapes). It’s a tactic that goes hand in hand with the megaproyectos (e.g. mining projects). What does mining mean? The extraction, the penetration, the violence against the earth. And this is the message...Because the bulk of the resistance is rooted in women. Maybe among them, there is a more perceptive, experiential relation with the territory. With the woman as procreator. This direct violence against women is not an accident. It’s a form of sending a message that here, possession is being taken of the territories, and of women’s bodies as part of the territory.

Josefa sees these unsolved allegeded highway rapes near San Miguel Chimalapa as connected to a counter-insurgency strategy by the state and organized crime, where terrorizing women dissuades them from activism and weakens communal resistance to extractive megaprojects. Basing herself on a lineage of indigenous scholars, Rebecca Hall applies an anti-colonial approach to social reproduction feminism that sounds quite similar to what Josefa is pinpointing. Hall (2016, 104-105) convincingly discusses how “the myriad forms of gender-based violence enacted against Indigenous women are tied to the historical and contemporary material and ideological colonial attacks on the social
reproduction of Indigenous lives and on the specific roles Indigenous women take up in non-capitalist subsistence and reproductive laboring activities.”

Though Josefa’s perspective sounds closer to eco-feminism with its partial adoption of maternalism (e.g. Stephens 2012, Connolly 2004), she believes that the popular notion of matriarchy reinforces political passivity in the face of both gender-based violence against indigenous women, as well as environmental violence against the land. Her perspective adds a layer of complexity that is not often heard in official movement meetings or read in movement communiques:

This thing called ‘matriarchy’…invisibilizes whole patterns of internal violence and domination. This type of discourse folklorizes women. I think it’s necessary to have a more organized, public denouncement (of the highway rapes) in order to properly politicize them and name them as political repression...and to dismantle these folkloric discourses (about Isthmus matriarchy).

Josefa feel there has been a complete lack of organized response to these alleged highway rapes from the broader activist movement. She attributes this to the way that gender issues are taboo and invisible. She says the discourse about Isthmus women being strong and emancipated is taken for granted and difficult to puncture. She has not brought this up to her colleagues in other groups, but says she looks forward to the day when mass organizations take the issue of sexualized violence seriously. Until that day comes, Josefa (like Nashieli) dedicates herself considerably (but not exclusively) to indigenous feminist collectives that she has founded.

This further suggests that the work of forming a strategy that links patriarchy with neoliberalism has largely fallen to women. In my field experience, I have noticed that young women with some academic training and familiarity with feminism have been
most critical of how local culture, and the movements that have been formed to protect this culture and its natural resources, reproduce relations of subordination. This in turn can render it difficult for some women to escape the “folkloric” label that women like Josefa find demeaning. For example, in Nashieli’s words, the image that women are supposed to give off in order to earn respect and supposedly fend off potential attackers is to be a “good woman” who is aesthetically pleasing, wearing a *huipil* (traditional embroidered dress). To this, Nashieli says “That’s fine, I too like being pretty and feeling good. But I also want to participate in the movement, and not just with someone else’s permission.”

The felt need for some women to increasingly organize as women (in addition to as indigenous/environmental activists) does not stem solely from their “matriarchal” context. Instead, it appears to be triggered by the “hidden” sexism they have experienced that contrasts with this matriarchal ideal.

**V. Fernanda: “I’m against romanticizing nature and romanticizing gender”**

Indigenous communities and women are not static and homogenous. They form and re-form their political and cultural identities while selectively borrowing from the region’s dominant culture, as well as criticizing it at times. They feel that their own identities fit in with the political needs of the movement differently during distinct times, such that they go back and forth between participating in smaller feminist groups for women and the more established organizations (which are multi-gender) that specifically focus on defense of territory against megaprojects.
Fernanda is a 28-year-old woman from Ixtepec, Oaxaca. Her perspectives, social background and experiences are similar to those of the two aforementioned feminist activists. While finishing her Geography Masters degree from UNAM, she was also teaching high school classes in a small northern Isthmus town, and giving frequent formal and informal talks and workshops. After getting an undergraduate Geography degree from the Universidad Veracruzana in Xalapa, Veracruz, she returned to Ixtepec in 2014 to put into practice everything that she had learned about the world of feminism from her university classes, and from collectives she had joined in college. She and her lifelong best friend, a feminist sociologist, formed a collective called *Las Nietas de los Binnigula’sa* (Grandaughters of the Ancient Zapotec Ancestors). Fernanda has also participated in two other small activist groups. One was called *Bacuzaguí* (which translates to “firefly”) in Zapotec. She co-organized another collective called *Bibani: Reconstruyendo con Identidad* (Bibani: Reconstructing With Identity) in the fall of 2017 just after a serious earthquake rocked the Istmo (see next chapter). *Bibani* is a Zapotec word meaning “rebirth,” and it also the name of a separate collective in Ixtepec that predates Fernanda’s and is more directly involved in Ixtepec’s anti-mine efforts.

Whether matriarchy is defined as women exerting their will against men, or as women being equal with men, these young Zapotec women are skeptical of the term. Rather than a matriarchy, Fernanda sees the Isthmus as a place infused with a “matrilineal ideal,” whose families are constructed matrilineally: “If you have a position in the market it is because you inherited it from your mother. If you sew it is because you learned it from your mother, or your grandmother or your godmother. That is why
women are recognized as heads of family, as the leaders of the economy.” Fernanda spoke at an international conference on Gender and Space in Mexico City in May of 2017 where she criticized how the 1930s leftist Mexican writer Miguel Covarrubias “exacerbated and romanticized” the concept of matriarchy vis-à-vis the Isthmus.

Like previous female respondents who pursued higher education, some of Fernanda’s positions have provoked pushback from villagers who are uncomfortable with her intellectual critique of concepts near and dear to Isthmus culture. She says that some accuse her of only speaking against the idea of matriarchy because she has been in academia. She answers them by saying “We do not need to be in academia to be able to see that what is happening is not matriarchy. It is not matriarchy.” I take this to mean that Fernanda believes sexism and machismo are visible and discernible to everyday members of the Isthmus, regardless of their level of formal education.

Fernanda finds that “shared experience from generation to generation” provides sufficient conceptualization for one to understand that Isthmus women (although empowered in certain ways) are decidedly not equal to men, and she sees leftist movement spaces as no exception. She learned how Isthmus culture was intertwined with patriarchy by listening to the experiences of previous generations of women: first through the stories of her grandmother, and then through initiating her first collective in Ixtepec, *Nietas de los Binnigula’sa*.

Of the 10 interviews that the *Nietas de los Binnigula’sa* collective conducted, some took more emotional work than others. One elderly woman spoke to her about sexual harassment in the previous generation of leftist organizing. This woman was the
founder of the FUP (Frente de Unidad Popular, or Popular Unity Front) in Ixtepec, and later of the COCEI, in the 1970s.

She spoke to me about sexual harassment in organizations and committees. She was the first woman who told me that you had to lift up your skirt, and allow men in the movement to put their hand in your vagina and you had to keep quiet. After her, Marina Meneses was another woman from Juchitán who denounced harassment in political activism. In other words, we lived this in the 1970s: the leftist machos are not new, they have always been around. The only difference is that now there are more denunciations of them, but it has always been going on.

For Fernanda, identifying as an indigenous feminist is a conscious political position. I asked Fernanda what it was about Zapotec culture that inspires her, and which specific elements of this culture and its role for women motivate her to defend the wellbeing of the community. Rather than enumerating any specific Zapotec spiritual traditions or cultural practices, she focused on how her grandmother endured domestic violence. Her grandmother died of uterine cancer, which according to Fernanda, was exacerbated by the beatings she received. This physical abuse had forced her to abort two pregnancies. Fernanda said she was asked this same question about Zapotec culture when being interviewed for a documentary, and that she was aware how her answer may seem contradictory. She elaborated:

I don’t recognize this ‘badass matriarchal Zapotec woman’. But at the same time, I cannot forget my roots, my duties, and my historical memory, which is to have grown up among women like the ones that I now reject. Women who worked for 40-50 years in occupations, like how my grandmother was able to put my father through school. My grandmother, she busted her ass, but my grandfather also beat her ass…So I assume myself as a Zapotec from immediate memory, because of my grandmother and the women who had to empower themselves in spite of the beatings.
that they received not only from life for being indigenous, but from their husbands, too.

Fernanda said she started to identify as Zapotec ever since she learned about the struggle of her grandmothers, aunts, and other women ancestors. She chose her ethnic/cultural identity based on experiential factors that she observed and understood intuitively. The experiences of her grandmother and other female ancestors have been incorporated as her own. Whereas Narayan (1997: 544) writes that she began to contest her own Indian culture due to the fact that “there was little justice or happiness for my mother in our house,” Fernanda’s similar observation of her grandmother’s struggles with domestic violence are what made Fernanda both proud to be Zapotec, and militant feminist.

Fernanda and her best friend Magaly decided to broadcast this genre of female/feminist life histories over radio by forming *Nietas de los Binnigula’sa* in 2014:

We both concluded that our purpose as Granddaughters of the Binnigula’ sa was to transmit to the pueblo…three concepts, that are usually only touched upon in cities, which are patriarchy, heteronormativity, and femicides. We had a radio program in Ixtepec called *La Popular* in which we dared to talk about these topics. We did political work, for a year and a half, with radio stations, by bicycle, fanzines, workshops, conversations, everything.

The station was later dismantled for not having a permit, like many community/pirate stations in Oaxaca. Fernanda adds that *Nietas de los Binnigula'sa* was the first young feminist collective in the Ixtepec area:

For those women who were and still are invisible in Ixtepec, our duty was to go to their homes on bicycles, and spend a lot of time talking with them. Learning their stories, we prepared them and later presented them on the radio.

Their goal was to increase awareness of women’s life stories and of their labor. They profiled women who were active in the formal sector, but they also worked with those
who did communal-reproductive work “like babysitting, for love and not for a paycheck.” Fernanda considers the majority of women in Ixtepec to be involved in this informal sector, such as “the caregivers, the market vendors, the seamstress, the women in charge of the prayers (las rezadoras).”

Regardless of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec’s female-centered legacy, it still is considered controversial to publicly discuss topics of patriarchy, heteronormativity, and femicides from a feminist standpoint. Thus, Fernanda’s activism proceeds through the pre-structured cultural channels of her immediate context by embodying the practices of tequio and matrifocality: the volunteer intellectual and emotional labor that Fernanda and Magaly performed to Ixtepec and a few surrounding towns is itself a form of tequio/Guendaliza’a (mutual aid to the community). In a culture where women get so much acclaim for taking care of the home, Fernanda and Magaly honored the unspoken aspects of household reproduction by broadcasting the life stories of these elderly women, whom they considered to be their own “grandmothers.” At the same time, her activism transforms and updates those gendered traditions by introducing a more radical critique of patriarchy.

Fernanda also spoke about the distinction between liberal reformism and radical feminism, and why she thought it was meaningful to be among the first to systematically apply the latter in her town. Introducing radical feminist perspectives into the political and cultural scene has been contentious:

We are in the 21st century, but there are still places where talking about this is taboo, like in rural spaces or semi-urban places. You can speak about machismo and domestic violence from a public policy standpoint. But if you speak with the strength of a radical feminist without restrictions, without feeling fear… They
always tell you ‘we have to treat *those* concepts cautiously because you are in a place that does not talk about that, where it is still not accepted, where blah blah blah.’ But if we hadn’t done it at that moment, we would still be in the same situation 3 or 4 years later.

Fernanda and another friend formed the Bacuzagui Collective in Juchitán in August of 2016 to develop a praxis around machismo on the political left: “The objective of the collective is to make visible the multiple types of violence that all women living in Istmo of Tehuantepec experience. The first three form of violence we touched on are sexual violence, communal violence, and violence in dating.” Her 34-year-old feminist friend, born in Juchitán, had an idea to give talks and workshops on these issues. Today, Bacuzagui is made up of seven women from Ixtepec, Juchitán, Ixtaltepec, Espinal, and Tehuantepec: two architects, one urbanist, one artisan, one reading mediator, one communicologist, and one geographer. Significantly, they adjusted their work to the context in Juchitán, in which they identified “communal violence” as “the control tactics that men apply to women in the organization sector by assemblies, meetings, decision making, all that.”

These young feminists had formed organizations designed to specifically fight against sexism and micro aggressions within social movement spaces, in what is supposed to be a cradle of indigenous “matriarchy” and of Mexico’s indigenous Left (the city of Juchitán). I asked Fernanda to elaborate on the forms that sexism takes in this area, and about its negative impacts on social and cultural movements. She began her

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27 The third and most recent activist collective Fernanda participates in (Bibani: Reconstructing with Identity) extends her commitment to Zapotec culture and women’s life histories in the form of community-based disaster relief. This is addressed in the following Chapter.
answer by saying that before 2010, when the Popular Assembly of Juchiteco People (APPJ) was formed in Juchitán to fight the first wind farms, there was not a social movement per se in the Isthmus. She said it was a watershed event in which a great many committees were formed with the explicit aim of initiating a movement. But she noted that the great majority of these are still led by men, and even the few visible female leaders could be (in her estimation) taking orders from other men.

I think that what is needed is to stop romanticizing social movement leaders, men and women. Especially the male leaders. I was talking with a friend about this. I think we have been slow to denounce the machista practices of false leaders in social movements. Just like we do in other spaces, why not do it here? Many are controllers, beaters, jealous, dominant. They do not let their partner or their wife talk. They have more than one partner, there are even some very famous men around here that like the younger ones as partners. It is not cool. They say, 'yes, yes compañera, go ahead and speak your mind,' but behind closed doors, it’s 'You do not talk, you do not go out, you say what I say. I go first before you.'… We need to demand reconstruction of the practices of romantic relationships of women towards men, of falling in love with a leader of the left. This is a terrible network.

She goes on to say, much like Josefa, that it would be powerful to publicly denounce “what is happening with the social movements, and the leaders of movements,” including male artists and poets, with regard to such sexism that perpetuates women’s subordination:

We women are also engaged in defending territory and the commons in our interests, but that we do not agree with violent and patriarchal practices. And that's why many (women), not only me, decided to isolate ourselves from certain movement groupings. We need a feminist life policy: of being among ourselves, to protect ourselves, to build spaces for us.

I probed whether Fernanda still participates in united-front type actions on issues that affect the whole region, such as mass actions against mega-mines. She enthusiastically
says that she does. But instead of directly becoming a member of the organizations who are leading those particular struggles, she works in (and works to carve out) autonomous feminist spaces like those she has discussed above. She finds that radical feminist politics can be made available as a corrective tool to some of the concrete problems she and her like-minded friends have experienced repeatedly, but she takes a “class first” position and emphasizes the need for unity with men:

I am of the idea now that spaces for women are necessary for security, but for me the emancipation of the community comes first. I cannot forget about my feminists either. But my positioning is first class, then it is gender.

In fact, while Fernanda connects her feminism to the stories of her grandmother, she largely credits her father for “always instilling socialist feelings in us.” Her father came from a working class family and was the first in the family to go to college—he studied Sociology at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), and then worked for the Mexican Coffee Institute (INMECAFE) for 19 years. This government position brought him to Oaxaca’s highlands of the Sierra Mixe, Sierra Juarez, the Mixteca and other regions, where he was also organizing coffee plantation workers to know their labor rights:

We have always lived in rural areas because of my father's work. We were a nomadic family, we lived in many places in Oaxaca… In all my journeys, I have always been with my dad. He always carried me on his shoulders. His friends are now friends of mine who love me very much…I first perceived the inequality in the fields rather than inequality between males and females. I now call it classism, but I perceived discrimination

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28 INMECAFE was a government regulated industry that provided technical assistance to coffee growers while administering coffee quotas to keep export prices high and stable. It was disbanded in 1989 under the neoliberal reforms of President Carlos Salinas de Gortari under World Bank advice which left small coffee farmers without protection from price volatilities in the world coffee market. For more on the historical place of coffee in Oaxaca and the contemporary movement for fair trade coffee, see Jaffee (2014).
against indigenous women more than discrimination and inequality between men and women.

As Fernanda reflected on her familial roots and her life experiences, she also acknowledged how growing up in an intellectual family (“the daughter of professionals”) influenced her ability and desire to work for the wellbeing of others: “I do not think I've ever been a girl who lacked things in life, but I've never had too much. I have always had the basics for living. That has made me a person who does not aspire for more because I had what was necessary to live.”

These biographical quotes help explain the opportunities and influences that set Fernanda on a particular kind of activist trajectory. She noticed the class differences throughout the Oaxacan countryside, and she admired how her father worked on behalf of poor coffee growers. But she also had the opportunity to pursue higher education and a life of the mind by majoring in Geography and studying feminist theory. She applies these life experiences to what she sees as the problems in Isthmus resistance movements, which she believes stem from capitalism, racism and patriarchy together. Asked about the role she wants for women in the resistance, Fernanda says:

“I want women in resistance who are anarcho-communists and feminists. I do not want reformist women, and reformist leaders even less so. [We need] women who, from within the opposition, continue trying to produce alternatives to capitalism, not just to neoliberalism.”

Fernanda’s explicit radicalism stood out as unique among all my respondents, and she also differed from movement groups for formulating an explicit rejection of idealized environmentalism. While much of the movement framing and rhetoric of indigenous
movements in Latin America has utilized the image of “Mother Earth” or even “Pachamama,” women like Fernanda have some philosophical and strategic differences with this approach. She explains that this feminine language used by movements is used to denote “a similarity between woman, mother, land, giver of life.” She acknowledges that this kind of framing has become more common in Mexico among movements defending natural resources, but she finds such framing unhelpful. She points out that Berta Caceres, a Honduran indigenous woman who was killed for leading protests against hydroelectric dams, identified as a defender of Mother Earth, but “even the rituals of Mother Earth could not protect her from corporate capitalism.” Maintaining a critical stance toward eco-feminism and maternalism, Fernanda says “I am against romanticizing nature and romanticizing gender.” I had never heard an activist say these words—especially not applying them to the iconic martyr Berta Caceres to suggest that neo-pachamamism is an insufficient guide for emancipating peoples and nature.

In my conversations with other men from NGOs and activist groups in Oaxaca, when I ask them about how they see women’s role in resistance, most of them marvel at how women are often the first to put their bodies on the line when it’s time to block an unwanted megaproject. When I share this with Fernanda, she scoffs:

What the fuck... Why? I am in favor of the body as the first line of defense, but why is it only in times of vulnerability, or risk, that they put us (women) in front? And then it’s applauded, as if they (men) are the ones providing space for us [as if we are] cannon fodder. We (women) are the ones who have to decide our role in social movements starting from the body as the first territory, not them. Plus, there are many women who assume they are leaders of the movement and who are the ones who tell the others that they have to go to the front lines... If it is decided that 'we are all going to give our bodies,' then we are all going to give our bodies.
Fernanda’s testimonies, at times sharply critical of dominant practices in the movement, seem to reflect the combination of her “nomadic” upbringing traveling around the countryside with her activist father, her observations of abuse against the women in her family, and her training in advanced feminist theories. Although the APOYO coalition of activists plays a central role in cohering land defenders and critics of the Special Economic Zone across dozens of Isthmus communities, it is important to remember that a younger generation of feminists participate in the defense of territory on their own terms. Their multiple efforts may not be as visible, but they too comprise a key force for social and cultural change in the region—particularly as an explicit commitment to transform multiple forms of inequality, including the complex and controversial fact of women’s subordination.

**SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

In my fieldwork, I have found that older Isthmus men see community activism as a defense of traditional gender norms (including the idealized Zapotec system of women’s centrality), while younger women imbue their own opposition to neoliberalism with a critique of these very norms and within their personal resistance to machismo.

In spite of women’s participatory role in Isthmus society, women are not the main and most numerous leaders, spokespeople, participants, or decision-makers in the anti-mining movement. Women’s informal labor contributes to this movement “behind the scenes,” such as by cooking for movement events, promoting and attending forums, and joining marches.
Respondents had different appraisals of the movement’s gender relations, which I read as flowing from their differing social positions and life histories. Older activist men are typically cheerful and prideful about women’s supposed role as the “backbone” of the movement. Men (as well as some women) assume that women are centrally involved in the movement because of their capacity to give birth, and to therefore “defend life” from the violence of extractivist neoliberalism that harms social reproduction. But the gap between cultural ideals of matrifocality and reality is a source of tension. Indigenous women who experience economic and social marginalization in their own communities, who have perceived it in their own family histories, and/or have engaged feminist texts articulate clear critiques of this romanticism. This concurs with the arguments Campbell and Green (1996: 178) were making two decades ago: “Contrary to popular opinion, Isthmus Zapotec women suffer from many of the inequalities endured by women in other societies, such as sexual abuse, the sexual double standard, limited educational and career opportunities, and an unfair burden of domestic work.” The growth of feminist organizations in the Isthmus suggests that more educated young women are actively confronting these norms. But their testimonies in this chapter still point to how men and women are stratified in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec—though in a different form and with different guiding norms than typical Western cultures.

My experiences lead me to assume that younger activists (both male and female) are more likely to have a gender consciousness and are less likely to see gender roles as egalitarian. Some female activists experience challenges in discussing gender within certain movement organizations and spaces. Consequently, these women have organized
women’s groups for gender consciousness-raising, while they still consider themselves very supportive of the overall defense of territory. This is similar to how Benita Roth (2004) traced the “separate roads to feminism” that Black, White, and Chicana women pursued during the Second Wave of feminism, in feminist organizations first emerged out of labor, student, civil rights, or other community-based activism.

CONCLUDING ANALYSIS

Akin to women supporters of the Zapatista movement in Chiapas (see especially Eber and Kovic 2013), some women in the Tehuantepec Isthmus are “redefining indigenous femininity” and “providing an important counter-trope to the inherited colonial images of indigenous women—and this strengthens them further” (Stephen 2000: 838). Some of these women have worked consistently in anti-mine work in their own communities. They may work in feminist collectives as researchers and forum organizers on gender issues and cultural revitalization. Others are morally sympathetic fellow travelers who want to see a more just and autonomous Isthmus, but whose own needs for economic survival have taken precedence over full-time activism.

The younger indigenous women that I spoke to who have some formal education, prior activist experience, and intense family activist histories were the most critical of gender roles within the movement. Their struggle with patriarchy in both the private and public sphere echoes Gladys Tzul Tzul’s (2014, 2015) indigenous feminism because these women are not willing to trade in their ethnic identity for their liberation, nor are they willing to tolerate what they see as machismo in order to claim membership in an indigenous culture.
These five interviews with Isthmus women dovetail with a point made by Hall and Fenelon (2008: 8): “Native American feminists often organize in ways that oppose more mainstream feminist movements. Typically, indigenous feminists focus on issues of identity and cultural preservation prior to more narrowly focused feminist concerns.”

While Josefa, Nashieli, and Fernanda stake out positions opposed to mainstream Western feminism (which they tended to view with some reservation, as alien to their own social context), ethnic identity is integral to their own feminist work. For Angeles as well, ideals about gender fairness are not separate from her desire to defend Zanatepec’s historic territory against environmental damage by mines, or her lifelong affinity for the customs and traditions of the Isthmus (which she elaborates and embodies through her part-time singing career).

However, I would add to Hall and Fenelon’s argument by pointing out that none of these women view their “own” culture as unproblematic, or as a matriarchal ideal. For these women, culture matters, but it is not simply a fossil to be “preserved.” Nashieli in particular is cautious about reproducing patriarchy and machismo in the name of cultural revitalization. Also, not only do these young female activists openly criticize moderate, reformist feminists. They also speak out in various ways (spontaneous as well as structured) against specific forms of sexism within the Oaxacan Left, such as how male artists and “leaders” who are seen as gurus have not been held to account for abusing female activists and artists emotionally. Those whose testimonies zeroed in on this
subject most strongly (Paulina, Nashieli, Josefa and Fernanda) had some familiarity with or proximity to feminist ideas which came from outside of the Isthmus.29

Paulina, Nashieli, Josefa and Fernanda also have had more experience in higher education. They expressed perspectives reminiscent of Uma Narayan’s “third world feminism” when they rejected the notion that their critique of patriarchy or their participation in academic conferences somehow diminished their membership in Isthmus culture:

Third-World feminists need to challenge the notion that access to ‘Westernized educations’, or our espousal of feminist perspectives, positions us ‘outside’ of our national and cultural contexts…We need to point to how demands that we be deferential to ‘our’ Culture, Traditions, and Nation have often amounted to demands that we continually defer the articulation of issues affecting women (Narayan 1997: 548-549)

The fact that Nashieli, Josefa and Fernanda have formed feminist collectives, as important as this is, does not automatically make the Isthmus a hospitable place for women to espouse radical feminism, or even to demand basic equality with men in intimate social interactions and property relations. Like the fight to unite the population against mines and against the expansion of existing wind energy parks, the struggle to inject and popularize feminist ideals in the Isthmus remains formidable. While clearly not as repressive as state violence or paramilitary violence, a Zapotec version of benevolent sexism (Barreto and Ellemers 2005) appears to make it more difficult for women to join

29 For example, the feminist theorists Fernanda named originate from Bolivia (Julieta Paredes) and Argentina (Maria Lugones), while Nashieli’s interview reminded me of the postcolonial feminism of Uma Narayan and Chandra Mohanty. Paulina is also influenced by the feminismo comunitario of Julieta Paredes. None of the women cited feminist theorists from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. Perhaps this next generation will spawn a wave of indigenous feminist writers, artists, and organizers originating from the Isthmus who become as widely cited as these aforementioned names.
and take leadership of large organizations, and to play a full role in the defense of their own territory, water, land, and bodies. In this sense, it is a barrier. To the extent that the pro-indigenous movement embraces the myth (perpetuated over decades by non-Isthmenians) that their society is already a matriarchy in which women rule or have achieved parity with men, this prevents a full reckoning with all the interconnected forms of inequality that are embedded in communities, while focusing attention only on the most obvious (“foreign”, “external”) ones, namely foreign-owned mining companies and megaproyectos.

A total of 12 of the 28 women I interviewed for this dissertation contrasted the ideal of Zapotec matriarchy to their own direct experiences with (and observations of) sexism, classism and other ethnic/geographic rivalries. This is significant seeing that many of the interviews I did with women were shorter, or took place in groups, which may have presented a methodological bias against broaching questions of gender. These 12 women who directly discussed gender as a concept tended to be interviewed for longer periods of time. They expressed great respect for female dignity and indigenous/Zapotec culture on the one hand, but uneasiness or exasperation with how the ideals of female empowerment seemed to accrue to a minority of women at the expense of the poor majority. A few female activists also talked about how they saw sexual violence and sexualized threats as a strategy of repression and dispossession used against women activists to break social movements. While considering how those interviews were not analyzed in this dissertation due to limited time and space, I take the following conclusions from this chapter.
First, people’s impressions about society, and the justness or injustice of social roles and identities, flow from the personal interactions they have had as a result of their own multi-layered social location. For example, Paulina, as a young semi-proletarian woman who has had some access to feminist and anti-systemic ideas through the Preparatoria José Martí community school, is very skeptical about calling her home region a matriarchy. As she lives, interprets, and reacts to a matrix of class, ethnic and gender inequalities, she concludes that some women are part of the same status quo that will benefit from (or at least not rise up to protest) the Special Economic Zone. She sees most women as tasked with the unequal burden of “communal” work which a handful of elite women and men privately appropriate, and she also sees women and some activists as too deferential to male micro-aggressions in public spaces.

Second, even some of these bitter testimonies about everyday sexism hint at some of the unique power that Isthmus women enjoy relative to other regions. For example, according to some of my informal conversations and my own experiences, the way that women can drink beer at fiestas in and around Juchitán would be less socially accepted in other indigenous towns of Oaxaca. Paulina does not talk about this as a level of personal freedom. Perhaps this is because she faces social sanction when she refuses to fully play the role of indulging men’s desires, which the fiesta scene still demands, and it is this repressive double standard which she associates with the local culture. Also, even her use of cuss words in everyday language and the candidness by which she touches on sexual and gender issues in her conversations with me and her friends and family flows from regional differences between Isthmus culture (which is more permissive in these matters,
including for women) and other parts of Mexico. This contradictory mix of being an insider to the culture while critiquing it, and of enjoying certain unique freedoms while straining to take them much further in the direction of full equality, is an interesting feature of Isthmus life that I found in various women’s testimonies, as well those of some men who critiqued their culture’s gender myths. Women are historic symbols of Isthmus matrifocal culture, but they endure exploitation in their households and personal lives. This is a special kind of objectification justified not by open misogyny, but by a veil of veneration that is contingent upon women playing their socially proscribed reproductive roles.

Socially constructed gender roles shape who can be involved in defending their territory and in what form. They erect barriers to equal participation, and they also influence who perceives (or does not perceive) these invisible barriers. Isthmus “matriarchy” is itself an inequality regime that reinforces “class, gender and racial inequalities” within social movement organizations and daily life through its “loosely interrelated practices, processes, actions and meanings” (Acker 2004: 443) that essentialize femininity as a life-bearing role, while they simultaneously exaggerate Zapotec women’s power in households and their historical prominence in anti-systemic movements. Building off of Acker (2004, 2006), matriarchal values in the Isthmus tend to hide and excuse the inequalities that women activists experience, activists commonly use maternalism and references to mother earth to culturally legitimate their anti-capitalist resistance to megaprojects. This is true even though the ideal of matriarchy does not appear to facilitate women’s organizational leadership of SMOs in actual practice. In
those individual cases where women have risen to prominent roles in the defense of territory, they have had to exert exceptional effort, and forge the necessary networks of support among feminists.

As the social movement community of the Tehuantepec Isthmus coalesces to challenge the “macro” threats of cultural dispossession and environmental violence, there is a way in which “micro” issues and interpersonal norms also become reflected and problematized within radical organizations. While men tend to take the official cultural storyline of gender equality (or “complementarity”) for granted, these notions are mistrusted by those women who are attracted to versions of feminism that speak to their own life experiences as non-elite indigenous women.

Even in an indigenous culture that prides itself on women’s moral leadership in many (but not all) realms of life, social position matters. Gender, class and ethnicity all shape people’s conceptions and life chances. They also impact people’s propensity to mobilize against a looming environmental injustice and to cohere the forms and frames of that mobilization.

In this way, gender relations and ideologies impact participants’ subjective experiences along with movement outcomes. Fighting against the “extractivist” development model implies taking stock of class, ethnicity, and gender questions simultaneously. Doing so allows movements to more seriously consider certain practical questions. These may include: Which persons are constructed as more vulnerable to human rights abuse? Who has access to full participation in the movement and who
doesn’t? Who is more motivated and able to struggle for the movement’s goals, despite risks?

Movement participants’ worldviews, beliefs, and ideologies regarding gender are socially produced and regulated by local values and norms based on matrifocal Zapotec culture. But women within this culture continue to experience various kinds of subordination, and the culture itself tends to make discussion of these realities taboo. Different members of the culture and of social movement organizations interpret gender roles (and their connection with territorial autonomy) differently based on their life experiences as members of intersecting social aggregates. Indeed, people’s common-sense notions of the world and gender roles are a product of their social position (i.e. their class, political experiences, and gender). These notions evolve in response to their social and political interactions with their changing material circumstances. This again echoes Narayan’s (1997: 549) basic position that “national and cultural contexts” are not a “homogenous space” inhabited by “authentic insiders who share a uniform and consistent account of their institutions and values.” Though all members of the socio-environmental movement(s) in the Isthmus tend to agree on the need to stop capitalist resource extraction projects from dispossessing them, there is no “one” voice on whether, how and why the “movement for life” should encompass the liberation from gender oppression.

As I stressed in the previous chapter, people’s lived experience with historically evolved social stratification leads different participants to have different assessments of the prevailing culture, the socio-environmental movement, and the gender-based claims of that movement. This underscores how “Women’s maternal and community politics
interacts with, and is shaped by, their social locations within multiple, intersecting relations of domination and subordination, including those based on gender, race or ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation” (Reese et al 2017: 1). In other words, since activists occupy distinct social locations, ethnic identities and cultural values are always being contested and re-shaped—they have never been static.

As an interrelated set of *practices*, *processes*, and *meanings*, inequality regimes (Acker 2004) operate within movement organizations, but they are contested: they are not taken for granted by all members. The daily challenges of movement-building create opportunities for more feminist-minded participants to unite anti-neoliberal movements with anti-colonial feminist politics, and to make organizational practices more consistent with organizational claims about autonomy and justice. Oaxacan activists of an indigenous background who are explicitly influenced by feminism do this by questioning inherited gender hierarchies and ideologies, including by identifying matriarchy as a manufactured trope that needs revision. In my field experiences, educated younger women tended to critique local inequality regimes for preventing women’s participation. In this way, they saw machismo as complicit with ceding indigenous territory to neocolonial projects. As differentially stratified individuals wrestle with these inherited cultural meanings and practices, these organizational inequality regimes can change.

At the same time, Acker’s concept of inequality regimes does not explicitly provide a materialist, cultural and anti-colonial appraisal of indigenous social reproduction. As indigenous subsistence economies are being attacked and undermined by globalized capital accumulation, especially largescale natural resource extraction, the
social reproduction of the community (and women’s gendered role within it) has become “a dynamic site of struggle and resistance” (Hall 2016: 93). Inequality regimes such as benevolent sexism, and cultural norms (reproduced in part by some Zapotec men) that “invisibilize” and “folklorize” women’s roles (in the words of Josefa) are subject to increasing scrutiny the more that young women seek to re-appropriate social space in their homes, communities and territories.

Communal empowerment against unwanted neoliberal investment schemes has a complicated but reciprocal connection to the personal empowerment and group empowerment of women attempting to participate as equals in all realms of life, including in anti-mine and anti-wind park organizing. Likewise, fully transcending such racial hierarchies and fighting environmental violence hinges a great deal on how the members of a population interpret their surroundings and seek to transform them as members of intersecting classes, ethnic groups, and genders. Indigenous women from different walks of life—some who adopt the label of feminism, and others who do not—are conscious and creative participants in communal life and in the struggle to protect this “way of life” from dispossession.
CHAPTER VI
From Dispossession to Disaster, Resistance to Resilience: Social Movement Strategies in the Wake of Oaxaca’s 2017 Earthquake

“Now is the time for our indigenous peoples. Now is the time to proclaim our autonomy and reconstruct our pueblos that have existed for centuries.”

-Preparatoria Jose Martí, Manuel Antonio Ruiz

“Acción Urgente”
First Communiqué on September 7, 2017

INTRODUCTION

On September 7, 2017, the 2017 “Chiapas Earthquake” struck Mexico from its epicenter about 60 miles off the Southern Pacific coast in the Gulf of Tehuantepec. This 8.5 quake was felt by 50 million people from Mexico City to Guatemala, but the Isthmus of Tehuantepec was the worst hit region. It was the most powerful earthquake to hit Mexico since the 1985 earthquake in Mexico City (which had a moment magnitude of 8.0), and it was also the strongest earthquake registered globally in 2017. This chapter looks at how the political dynamics around neoliberal development policies and projects in the Isthmus region set the terms for how the Mexican government, indigenous activists, and everyday people each responded to the sudden natural disaster.

In this situation, social movement organizations who had been organizing against the dispossession of their natural resources and lands became focused upon providing disaster relief to their target audiences and supporters. Their tactics during this period were consistent with their prior frames about government corruption and inequality. Activists in this region exhibited resistance (i.e. contentious mobilizations for rights) as well as resilience (i.e. an ability to cope with external disturbances and stresses [Adger 2000, Adger et al 2005]). Observing this gave me a richer sense of how natural disasters...
are defined and constructed by dominant political and economic factions. It also stands as a lesser studied example of how vulnerable or oppositional communities harden their pre-existing grievances based upon internalizing their direct, personal experiences with post-disaster government policies.

The earthquake physically affected 800,000 people of the Isthmus, where 70,000 homes were damaged and 15,000 broken beyond repair. Estimates of about 85-100 casualties were reported in the region. In Juchitán, a city which was closest to the quake’s epicenter, 75 percent of 20,000 private homes were damaged. But the disaster did not end on September 7. Well into the month of November, thousands of aftershocks (sometimes measuring up to 4.5 on the Richter Scale) continued to provoke anxiety among residents of the Tehuantepec Isthmus throughout the fall season. With every aftershock, residents worried that their home would tumble down onto them, and indeed some aftershocks did cause homes to fall, either in part or completely. I found that many people felt unsafe sleeping indoors for this reason, but they were also afraid to sleep outside due to the fear of vandalism and crime.

These psychological traumas were compounded by the region’s underdevelopment and its population’s lack of access to scientific information and knowledge about why the ground continued shaking for weeks. This is particularly true of more remote areas. In the ethnic Ikoots fishing village of San Francisco del Mar, numerous people described how when water bubbled up from cracks in the sand, they feared the earth would swallow them whole. The Chiapas quake was followed by heavy rains in the Isthmus. In lagoon towns like San Mateo del Mar, stagnant waters which
flooded the streets contributed to skin infections. This added to the collective feelings of insecurity and to the material privations of an already marginalized population. In this situation of panic and momentary psychosis, many rumors circulated. When I returned to the area to pursue the second leg of my field research from October through December of 2017, I overheard people at fiestas and other social settings presupposing that the quake had been provoked by mining exploration in the nearby Chimalapas mountains, or was somehow brought about as a plot by the U.S. and Mexican governments to drive local people off of their valuable lands.

Mexico’s federal government, then controlled by Enrique Peña Nieto of the PRI (Institutional Party of the Revolution), announced 16 billion pesos in relief funds for affected areas of Oaxaca and Chiapas, while Oaxaca’s state government authorized 200 million pesos for home reconstruction. But just two weeks later, on September 19, another earthquake of 7.1 magnitude struck Mexico City, ironically on the 32nd anniversary of the 1985 Mexico City Earthquake. A total of 370 people perished in Mexico City, Morelos, Puebla, Mexico State, and Oaxaca. As the Mexico City earthquake of 2017 shifted much of the media attention away from the situation in Oaxaca and Chiapas, international aid and government relief to the Isthmus diminished, according to respondents of mine who live in the Isthmus.

This chapter argues that government policies after the earthquake facilitated capital accumulation by materially dispossessing people of their property and by neglecting their physical needs, but also by damaging the cultural and symbolic resources of Zapotecs. State responses to the Oaxacan earthquake by the federal, state and
municipal governments were embedded in, and reinforced, Mexico’s dependent neoliberal capitalism. I find three key mechanisms of how state policies in the wake of the earthquake functioned so as to maintain inequalities of power in the region that benefit ruling elites and foreign investors. I identify these mechanisms as *neglect, dispossession, and pacification*. Each of these analytical terms is defined in the next section.

This chapter also discusses how the social movement community in the Istmo region resisted these policies and actions of the state. Everyday Zapotec people developed political responses to post-earthquake neglect, dispossession, and pacification as a way of continuing their movement for life and territory and as a way of renewing indigenous worldviews, knowledge, and norms based upon solidarity. This analysis about social movement responses to the disaster itself and to these three mechanisms of inequality therefore connects this chapter with the previous dissertation chapters about the indigenous struggle for life and territory, and of the ethnic/class/gender dynamics of this mobilization.

**THEORETICAL OVERVIEW**

*Neglect* by government agencies denotes the way in which goods and services are inadequately provisioned for victims of natural disasters. In the case of the earthquake, neglect refers to federal, state and local indifference and inconsistency, both in the early stage of providing immediate relief goods, and then in later rebuilding of local economic infrastructure, schools and private homes. My argument about neglect also indicates the government’s lack of emergency preparedness in remote, rural and marginalized areas.
Rivera and Shondel Miller (2007) catalogue how federal government neglect of the African American community throughout hurricane Katrina (as well as previous flood disasters) played a role in “forcing the involuntary internal displacement” of large numbers of African Americans (Rivera and Shondel Miller 2007: 503). In an analogous fashion, neglect on behalf of government units towards the mostly indigenous people of the Tehuantepec Isthmus throughout fall of 2017 compounded the suffering and trauma endured by hundreds of thousands of people (some more than others), whose experiences can only be captured in a partial way here through the presentation of key quotes, observations and news reports.

While the property destruction of the Oaxacan earthquake, the harm of the subsequent government abandonment, and the death toll were smaller than those of Hurricane Katrina in the Gulf Coast and Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico, government neglect of earthquake-affected areas in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec nevertheless added to the existing strains experienced by most Isthmus residents have been experiencing. Neglect can cause more people to abandon the Isthmus and leave behind their way of life, in order to seek a livelihood elsewhere. Neglect in the face of natural disasters thus further undermines indigenous people’s social cohesiveness and strains their ability to live in, and manage, their territory. This cultural and social dissolution, in a sense, potentially allows multinationals and the state wider access to the territory. The proposed uses of this mostly communal land for the export-oriented extraction of energy and resources further interferes with the social reproduction of indigenous communities that I have been cataloguing throughout this dissertation. Similar to the racist abandonment of
African Americans by the U.S. government during natural disasters in the Deep South, the subjective experience of government neglect also tends to reinforce the distrust that a subjugated group previously felt towards government institutions.

*Dispossession* is another mechanism of inequality. In Butler and Athansiou (2013: 2), Butler states that “Dispossession is precisely what happens when populations lose their land, their citizenship, their means of livelihood, and become subject to military and legal violence.” Anthropologist Tania Murray Li (2010: 385) similarly acknowledges that dispossession includes the “devastating threat to indigenous people’s lives and livelihoods posed by large-scale enclosures of land for dams, mines, logging or plantations.” Li (2009) also links dispossession to neoliberal policies that have abandoned social support for rural populations and/or that concentrate land in few hands while impeding peasants’ access to land.

These mutually agreeable definitions of dispossession are consistent with the conceptual framework I have used in the prior chapters when discussing the structural factors that are driving rural Oaxacans into precarity. This chapter supplements these materially-based explanations with a cultural perspective. While interacting in the field with earthquake survivors, it became apparent that post-earthquake actions by political and economic elites ruptured *subjective meanings* for everyday Zapotec people. In making this argument, I have been influenced by Short’s (2010) sociological approach to indigenous genocide. By emphasizing how the destruction of a social group can take place through physical means (i.e. through the killing of its members) as well as cultural means (i.e. by inflicting damage upon the group’s way of life), Short resurrected the
original definition of genocide (Lemkin 1944: 79-95) and applied it to the contemporary situations of many indigenous peoples around the world. Short’s position is that genocide (the destruction of a distinct social group) “can be achieved in a variety of ways not restricted to physical killing. It could be through…suppression of language, religion, law, kinship systems, and other cultural practices through which the people maintain the relations among themselves, or through the imposition of severe conditions of life that break down social solidarities” (Short 2010: 842, emphasis in original).

Drawing on this point, this chapter argues that the form of “reconstruction” proposed and promulgated by the state immediately following the disaster can be interpreted as “cultural dispossession.” In adopting policies and practices that incentivized home demolition, authorities disrupted the attachments to land, place and collective memory which serve as foundations for indigeneity in the Isthmus towns under study. Based on testimonies, observations, and outside reports which I synthesize throughout this chapter, I argue that “cultural dispossession” aptly describes the coercive demolition and attempted demolition of inhabitants’ traditional homes.

Since I don’t argue that the indigenous peoples of the Isthmus are currently undergoing total (genocidal) destruction, I reject Short’s language of “cultural genocide” to describe these state policies, instead adopting the term “cultural dispossession.” At the same time, a legitimate debate can be had about whether to characterize the situation as genocide. I acknowledge that my field respondents themselves, as well as other scholars specializing in genocide studies, may have important views to add to this discussion. For example Dunlap (2018c: 552) discusses how wind energy in the Tehuantepec Isthmus reinforces ecocide and ethnocide by “continuing to assimilate and target (indigenous) people who continue to value their land, culture, and relationships.” Also, social reality is open-ended. It is conceivable that today’s dynamics of could escalate to take more physically violent, repressive or openly genocidal forms.

Pinpointing the exact impetus for this set of policies is challenging, but one could surmise that blocs of ruling elites pursue a mix of profit-making and political concerns. The Mexican state needs to facilitate trade and GDP growth in order to maintain its legitimacy to investors and global financial institutions, as well as to maintain the support of powerful domestic entrepreneurs and pro-infrastructure constituencies such as the unionized construction workers of the CTM (Confederación de Trabajadores de México). At the same time, “disarticulating” rebellious movements in geostrategic regions such as the Isthmus that oppose neoliberal policies and that challenge the existing distribution of wealth and power fulfills state and...
This is to say, dispossession has material as well as cultural or symbolic aspects that generate disruptions in communal life. While not necessarily employing armed violence or forcibly relocating people from their lands, these disruptions can lead to grievances and resistance when a community feels its norms to be at risk. The case of the September 2017 earthquake in Oaxaca’s Isthmus and its aftermath thus makes possible a timely analysis of how state legitimacy can become further contested over cultural questions that surface during natural disasters. The concept of cultural dispossession helps us understand the sources and forms of dissent and counter-mobilization that pre-existing social movement organizations used to contest state-led “disaster relief” while striving to provide for the material and cultural needs of their base communities. This term parallels James Fenelon’s (2014) coinage of the “culturcide.” Fenelon describes culturcide as the way in which the United States “employed sophisticated cultural domination and societal elimination to maintain its hegemonic control and land tenure alienation strategies [over Native American nations], including use of ideological history and manipulation of identities” (Fenelon 2014: 14).

My use of the term pacification applies critical sociological analyses of U.S. protest policing to current-day Oaxaca. Using the 2014 Ferguson, Missouri rebellion corporate interests, as long policies still maintain the appearance of being in the interest of the people or the nation. Encouraging construction companies to remove damaged homes with non-union day laborers seems to accomplish each of these ends. It preserves the appearance that the state has arrived to swiftly help indigenous people rebuild after a disaster. As discussed in this chapter, it provides financial opportunities for capital, and even for outright plunder, as in when companies accept government money and disappear without fulfilling their obligations to rebuild a family’s home. Finally, the state radically alters physical surroundings in the name of disaster relief. By bulldozing the indigenous aesthetics of a place instead of preserving them in consultation with impacted groups, such policies can diminish the very collective identities that oppositional cultures have been rooted in.
against police brutality as a test case, Kienscherf (2016a: 1179) argues that “liberal social control is best understood as uneven processes of pacification targeting specific individuals, groups and populations through a combination of coercion and consent.” Thus, rather than making collective action uniformly costly, as in standard definitions of “repression” (e.g. Tilly 1978: 100), social control in outwardly democratic states aims to “produce undisruptive and unthreatening forms of collective action” by isolating radical opponents while institutionalizing and co-opting others (Kienscherfa 2016: 1181). These insights, which borrow from Gramsci, can be modified and extended to explain how governmental responses to the earthquake in the Isthmus were a continuation of counter-insurgency policies that undermine local dissent and indigenous self-determination.

Pacification is specifically evident in public policies that combined social welfarism with increased military presence in order to placate the larger population. The social welfare payments offered to (some) residents can be seen as a pacification measure, while the same could be said for the threat of force which was visible in the presence of soldiers and marines. This governance of a natural disaster situation via the attempted pacification of social movements aimed to re-establish hegemonic authority in a manner that bolstered social inequalities of class, ethnicity, and gender. This resembles the conclusions reached by Kienscherf (2016a: 1189) about how singling out certain groups for coercive or consensual treatment reflects and reinforces prevailing social hierarchies.

Finally, before presenting field data on these themes, I caution that neglect, dispossession and pacification, as mechanisms of inequality, should not be viewed as
fixed processes that are bound to secure capital’s influence of the region and that merely guarantee the further subjugation of indigenous “victims.” I don’t accept an overly deterministic approach in which these mechanisms of inequality are an inevitable “done deal.” Rather, like capital itself, these processes are relational and interactional, and therefore (particularly in their early phases) they are susceptible to being challenged and interrupted by collective action “from below” which consciously interprets and acts upon them.

The public debate in the region about the damage and reconstruction, and the regional activist responses to the disaster, reflected the political and cultural struggle over conflicting development models and over worldviews that I have traced throughout previous chapters. Activist collectives, environmentalists, and campesinos (among others) who were previously mobilizing in defense of land rights and livelihoods tended to frame the government response to the earthquake in terms of their opposition to the Special Economic Zone in the Isthmus Corridor. They had no blueprints with which to respond to a natural disaster on this scale, but their reactions were largely in line with their pre-disaster strategies and ethno-political visions. Organizations in the region affiliated with the APOYO movement (as well as other indigenous activists) viewed stopping the dispossession of homes by construction companies as intimately joined with stopping the dispossession of lands by mining companies. They constructed political threats and grievances in accordance with their everyday experiences of neglect, dispossession, and militarization. They also did so based on an integral understanding of place (e.g. Gieryn 2000, Guenther 2010).
Finally, this case indicates how government constructions of “target populations” come to “influence [their] political orientation and participation patterns” (Schneider and Ingraham 1993: 335). Government proclamations after the disaster designated (“constructed”) earthquake victims as a socially meaningful and deserving category of people. But many residents experienced the actual quality and form of “aid” as inconsistent with these public declarations of governmental solidarity. These groups experienced politicians’ lack of accountability as consistent with its neglect of what indigenous movements call la vida or “life.” The tension between the government’s construction of the disaster victims as worthy of help, and its continued preference for largescale capital accumulation over local community development, appeared to provide movements of opposition with an opening to launch new claims and challenges against the hegemonic state.

SOCIOLOGY OF DISASTERS

Traditional sociological perspectives on natural disasters have been dominated by functionalist theories until relatively recently. This theoretical lens often saw disasters as “consensus crises” that suppressed conflict by enhancing social solidarity. Such studies were greatly shaped by the needs and dictates of what Stallings (1995) calls “the earthquake industry,” meaning governments, funders and mainstream disaster relief organizations. As such, disaster studies initially took shape as its own self-contained field that did not converse with existing sociological theory and research.\(^\text{32}\) For example, the

\(^{32}\) One exception is Kai Erickson’s (1976) famous account of how a devastating flood in Logan County, West Virginia led to social disintegration and outmigration by imposing collective trauma on the impacted communities.
“natural hazards perspective” typified by White (1974) was about identifying best practices for disaster relief policy by studying how people adjust to environmental extremes. As made clear by more recent critical scholars, this early research on natural disasters tended to “bolster institutions concerned with the control of nature and human societies” (Tierney 2003: 509).

In contrast to taking the vantage point of the state or mainstream disaster management organizations, my analysis of this earthquake proceeds through the lens of ordinary people and social movement organizations. Disasters provide elites with the opportunity to maintain social distinctions and power inequities, and the elite responses to these disasters are embedded in the institutional logic of capitalist states and economies.

Whereas immediate responses to disasters by governments (such as the provision of shelter and security) can be seen as benign, previous research suggests these measures are typically designed to politically contain potentially rebellious populations and uphold state legitimacy (Stallings 1998). Natural disasters also often provide direct benefit to private interests. By destroying fixed structures, disasters liberate the capital that had been fixed in them, thus clearing the space for new investment opportunities (Rozario 2001, Saltman 2015). I show how these processes operated in the Isthmus region in the context of elites’ attempted implementation of the Special Economic Zone and grassroots resistance to the economic, political and cultural assumptions of this dominant development model.
My interpretation of the earthquake and its aftermath is influenced by neo-Marxist perspectives (e.g. Foster 1999) and environmental justice research (e.g. Bolin and Kurz 2018) that studies how capitalism disproportionately shifts the burdens for environmental hazards onto groups of people who are socially marginalized. I agree with the critical environmental justice literature that social relations of race and class fundamentally structure disaster vulnerability. Since the capitalist state’s violent sanctioning of “death and degraded bodies and environments” remains central to “racial capitalism” (Melamed 2015), the state’s responses to natural disasters should also be understood in terms of the socio-environmental conflicts occurring in society. I situate the 2017 Southern Mexico earthquake within globalized capitalism’s drive to commodify nature and life (as discussed in Chapter II) as I trace how the disaster was socially constructed and responded to by its primary victims, given the region’s current history of radical and indigenous mobilization.

LOCAL CONTEXT: RELEVANT GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS AND POLICIES

Several agencies of the Mexican federal government acted as important players in the wake of the disaster in Oaxaca. One is SEDATU, the Office for Agrarian, Land and Urban Development. SEDATU is the National Housing Commission and BANSEFI is Mexico’s federal savings bank. FONDEN, Mexico’s Natural Disasters Fund established in the late 1990s, was also involved. The combined policy of these agencies was to distribute stored value bank cards to Mexicans who signed forms “proving” that their home had been demolished or partially damaged. For homes declared a “total loss,” meaning those with irreparable damage, the federal government offered 120,000 pesos
(about 7,000 US dollars) distributed by FONDEN over a period of 4 months and contained in 2 stored-value debit cards. One of the bank cards was to be used to purchase new building materials, and the other would pay for the cost of labor used in rebuilding. While showing how neglect, dispossession, and pacification infused this “relief” process, the following section portrays how the grassroots activists discussed in previous chapters (as well as new coalitions of actors) linked these policies and institutions to the neoliberal model of capitalism they have been contesting.

ETHNOGRAPHIC EVIDENCE: NARRATIVES OF RESILIENCE

Reviving Tequio in Ixtepec: Addressing Neglect Through Volunteer Labor

Susana lives on a lot in Ixtepec with two families, a total of eight people in two small houses. Five weeks after the earthquake, she and her neighbors were living outdoors in tents that her husband and brother-in-law had fashioned out of coconut tree wood that they had bought from a coconut farm. They had tied sheets onto tree trunks and branches while propping up sheets of hard plastic laminate to use as walls. Susana is a supporter of the Comité Ixtepecano Vida Territorio. She says she’s had a longtime family friendship with some of the group’s most active members. Her husband is a taxi driver, while she works as an informal tortilla-seller on the streets. Commenting on her fifth-grade education and her work ethic, she says “I don’t have studies, but I have this talent in my hands. I’m used to working. I prepare food for the people. We have no other option for making a living.” She says she makes between 180 and 240 pesos a day (about $10-$15) selling tortillas. Her family will invest the debit cards they get from the
government into whatever materials they can in order to slowly rebuild the house that had already taken them years to build.

Susana showed me how the main room in her small cinder block home had caved in, making it unsafe to sleep in. She said the first few days after the quake were the most difficult: “It felt hopeless to sleep in the rain…It was really a spiritual pain to see fallen homes and people who were hurt.” The quake hit on a Thursday, and the family did not have electricity until Monday. The makeshift roof under which her family was now sleeping in tents and beds was made with tequio (volunteer labor). I typically found that families and neighbors tried to help one another in the immediate days after the earthquake while pooling their own labor and resources.

Even though a military base is located in Ixtepec, Susana found it difficult to acquire aid, food and supplies. She said the marines did distribute some goods such as tuna and rice, but they would not come to one’s door with these donations. She was only successful in getting aid if she flagged them down when she saw the soldiers in the street while she was out selling tortillas. She said this situation made it difficult for elderly residents, who were not out on the streets, to access relief goods: “Nobody knocked on our door and came here to say that relief goods are being passed out,” said Susana. In our interview, she also protested that government reconstruction efforts ignored local employment needs and capacities:

We have people here who manufacture nails, day laborers who produce cement blocks. Why not give the work to our people here, instead of bringing material from outside? The mayor contracts a construction company that brings their own workers. We have many people here who are workers, who need work. We didn’t think it would take such a tragic
situation for us to get jobs. People who have knowledge and skills, they leave, instead of applying that knowledge here.

Here, Susana identifies a developmental problem in Ixtepec where skilled Ixtepecans emigrate in search of work, and people with local businesses are left out of development plans. Outside companies bring their own labor force to benefit from Ixtepec’s strategic location as a trading city, but they do not stay for long-term periods.

I spoke to women in Ixhuatán who uttered similar critiques and worries which were tied to political mistrust of politicians. Yolanda is a schoolteacher at the public grade school in Ixhuatán. Her family is middle class, and their home did not suffer extensive damage besides some cracks in the cement wall, but she says the aid they received from the government was still insufficient to repair their home. Yolanda’s husband is a photographer who has worked in the United States professionally, and who created an online photo gallery that captured scenes of destruction and reconstruction in Ixhuatán one month after the earthquake. Yolanda was educated in one of the Normal Rural schools in Oaxaca’s Mixteca region—she and her husband both have sympathies and commitments with the political left.

Her first impressions after the earthquake were that “Nothing is secure or eternal. That night was like being born again. We began to love one another again as families, neighbors, brothers.” The next morning, she found the pueblo devastated and grieving. She recounted how in the Istmo, it took three days (and sometimes a whole week) for the

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33 She does not work at the Preparatoria Jose Martí, the small school in Ixhuatán that participates in the APOYO social movement.
Yolanda felt that *paisanos* (meaning, people from Ixhuatán who now lived in other regions of Mexico) were the main help. “The authorities really didn’t show much solidarity. At least they could have held a meeting bringing us together as townspeople, giving us more information about what to do after an earthquake. Instead they were just telling everyone to go to Reforma for relief.” Reforma de Pineda is the next neighboring town, a ten-minute drive towards Juchitán.

Yolanda said that the message she got from the government was “*o tiras, o arreglas*”—meaning, “you can either demolish your house, or you can fix it yourself.” Her friends have houses that were very damaged that should have gotten “level 3” aid (120,000 pesos, but they received level 1 (15,000 pesos). Since the government changed the aid structure from three levels to only two, Yolanda felt “They didn’t do what they promised, as always. People expected another 15,000 pesos.” Her parents’ house also had cracked walls, but the “level 1” support they received on their bank card was also insufficient to fix the house.

Yolanda’s sister-in-law, Silvia, is a minimum wage worker at a local school and the housewife of a high school math teacher in Ixhuatán. Unlike Yolanda’s family, Silvia and her family were sleeping in a windowless half-constructed house with dirt floors on their lot for months, because their main house was too damaged and they could not afford to repair it. Silvia also felt abandoned by Ixhuatán’s local government:

> For the first 3 days after the earthquake, we had nothing to eat. Just cookies and coffee that a store owner gave to my son because they had fallen on the floor during the quake. We don’t matter to the *presidente* (mayor, municipal president). He never walked the streets to greet us and
ask what was happening, how we were doing. There was help, but it was given by private persons, people from the pueblo who live in Monterey, Jalisco, Mexico, Veracruz... It was given by the Church. But from the authorities? From the municipio? Nothing for us. We didn’t receive any help.

Local government programs seemed well-intentioned on the surface. But in practice, they appeared to help those who were politically connected as opposed to assisting people universally. I heard similar experiences people were having with a program called Empleo Temporal that was initiated after the earthquake. Under Empleo Temporal, people in some municipalities could sign up to get a basic wage (900 pesos total) to pick up debris from streets and houses. In nearby Union Hidalgo, a friend by the name of Alfonso Arenas Lopez active with the community radio station La Otra Radio informed me that 700 people were rejected from the program. These people complained about how they saw elderly relatives of police or municipal secretaries picking up one or two pieces of debris, took photos as proof, and then quit. Meanwhile, others in need were not informed about how to sign up for Empleo Temporal.

According to Silvia, this questionable policy also took place in Ixhuatán. Silvia said: “For the people who could access the program, great. Good for them. But for el pueblo, we the people didn’t know. This program was only among them, all covered up.”

Judging from this quote, Silvia seems to agree with my other informant Alfonso that the program was actually implemented to pay the families of the local political administration. She differentiates this “them” of political elites from el pueblo—the broad population. The conscious lack of transparency Silvia perceives is signaled in her words that news of this program was kept “all covered up” (bien tapadito.)
A Zapotec man from Union Hidalgo involved in social movements who wished to remain anonymous perceived “corruption, poor leadership, absence of authority, and a total lack of order” in the days following the earthquake. For 5 to 6 days, he said electricity was out and water was scarce, leading to “a real sense of emergency” in the town. “Anonymous” frequently associates with campesino associations against the expansion of Union Hidalgo’s wind energy park (e.g. Manzo 2017, Critchley 2017) and with neighborhood committees in his community. He also travels throughout the region and has spoken to various villagers about their experiences navigating government assistance in the fall of 2017. From his perspective, the debit cards given out by the government were fraught with irregularities, such as residents who were given empty debit cards and “cloned” cards.

More than just hearsay, deficiencies in aid have been acknowledged by the national government itself. Virgilio Andrade, Mexico’s Director of BANSEFI, filed charges against 60 cases of “cloned” debit cards which defrauded families in Oaxaca and Chiapas (Mexico News Daily 2017) with the largest portion of such cases reportedly coming from Ixtepec (Manzo 2018). Germana Cueto Fuentes, an elderly widow I interviewed in Ixhuatán along with her elderly unmarried cousin Julietita, also said they knew community members whose debit cards were devoid of funds, and they were still waiting for the government to survey their homes as of mid-November of 2017. Germana said her brother was promised 30,000 pesos but only received 15,000 (Germana and Julietita interview).
These anecdotal stories also seemed typical in other testimonies and news reports that suggest a pattern of opaqueness and neglect. For example, they are evident in nationally publicized allegations that aid was being funneled to wealthy families with multiple properties who did not suffer damage (Guerrero 2017) and to ex-politicians who received relief funds for properties that did not belong to them (Romo 2017). Organized resistance spread the longer that residents felt their needs were not being met, such as when 900 indigenous people in the municipality of San Domingo Petapa blocked two kilometers of Trans-Isthmus Highway in protest of never having their homes surveyed by SEDATU (Martínez 2017).

Journalists reported that “for those who decided to rebuild, [government] funds have proven insufficient, due to how, among other factors, the price of construction materials has increased in the region” (Flores 2017). Consistent with research on how capitalist markets enable firms to raise prices and accumulate extra profits during natural disasters (Saltman 2015), my respondents cited similar concerns about rising costs of labor and cement in the region. This shows how market forces combined with inadequate regulations and lack of transparency in public relief policies facilitated the neglect of indigenous territories in the Isthmus.

Another example of how local needs were neglected in the government-led relief effort can be seen in the type of “aid” that was delivered. At a presentation in front of a small collective of activist academics and teachers on November 20, 2017, a young geographer named Fernanda (interviewed in the previous chapter) recounted how the
government sent cans of tuna to fishing communities and boxes of heavy clothes during the sweltering weather.

Mexico’s SEDATU agency was tasked with surveying the damage from the earthquake, sending its personnel house to house in each community to record how many families needed financial assistance rebuilding their homes. But as of February, Mexican news media reported that more than 20,000 families had never been surveyed by SEDATU or by anyone, and about 5,000 were requesting re-classification of the original assessment the government had given them because they found the original assessment to be erroneous. Protestors accused the governor and all levels of government of being “inept, incapable, and dishonest” (Ignacio 2018).

Even several months after the disaster, government policies suggest further evidence of systemic neglect. On April 11 of 2018, the government had scheduled a public consultation in Union Hidalgo to discuss the installation of an additional wind energy park on the outskirts of the indigenous town. Union Hidalgo’s Asamblea de Comuneros (communal landholders’ assembly) cancelled the meeting, raising the protest slogan “Construction of our living places, not wind parks!” (Desinformémonos 2018). The governments’ continued attempt to construct megaprojects of questionable communal benefit, offering foreign investors major tax breaks while towns like Union Hidalgo remain dotted with debris and collapsed homes, signals a disrespect for the local population and for indigenous people in general. Prioritizing an already controversial megaproject over community reconstruction embodies a logic of dispossession vis-à-vis
the poor and working-class majority of the Tehuantepec Isthmus that continued in the aftermath of the natural disaster.

Additionally, I use the term *neglect* to signify not only material abandonment, but inadequate public education about the science of earthquakes and about community reconstruction. Fernanda Latani of Ixtepec pointed out how the government’s own research on this question was not utilized or shared with communities. She said the state has commissioned some high-quality research on earthquakes that was never utilized or disseminated to communities like her own who were at risk. CENAPRED is Mexico’s National Center for the Prevention of Disasters, a federal agency attached to the Secretariat of the Interior.

There’s a CENAPRED manual from 2010. My respect to those who made it...perhaps it was done by consultants hired by the state. It’s a manual to rebuild houses affected by quakes and floods—a great piece of work (*Esa chambota es muy buena*). But CENAPRED was absent in Mexico City and the Isthmus during the quakes...So if the state made this manual, why is it hidden?

Fernanda even faulted her own training as a geographer for failing to prepare her to address the needs of her community in a natural disaster. She said that in San Francisco de Mar, an *Ikotts* man asked her and her colleagues the basic question of why the ground kept shaking, but Fernanda felt unable to provide a compelling answer. She said that encounters like this made her more aware of the need to “transmit collective knowledge, from the ground up, and bring it to people (*poblaciones*) in their own languages.” Fernanda feels that information of this kind was inaccessible and unavailable: “The population should have been
informed in an immediate way. But there was a complete absence of research centers.”

In addition to how neglect applies to both the material needs as well as information, all the respondents had a common concern for the theme of cultural autonomy in reconstruction. Elida Rosado Santiago and Jose Sergio Toledo are a married couple with children who live in a neighborhood of Ixtepec’s 6th Section. A daughter of a campesino, Elida has a small home-based fashion design business, while Sergio is a taxi driver. Elida felt that after the earthquake, “everyone focused on Juchitán, but forgot about Ixtepec.”

As longtime friends and supporters of the Comité Ixtepecano, Elida and Jose Sergio oppose the mining projects in Ixtepec. They favor maintaining cultural traditions of mutual aid, and they were enthusiastic about working with the Comité to refurbish their damaged home. During a conversation in their home, whose rooms were cracked and caving in, Elida opined that “the distribution of relief was not equitable. The army’s soldiers went street to street, but then they became more closed off. As women, we would ask for milk and diapers: these things are for the children! They would tell us we’d need a written document to get these, and that they’d get back to us in 10 or 15 days.”

Since schools had been closed for two months due to damage during the time of this November interview, the children had to be supervised by families. In fact, even by early January 2018, according to Ixtepec’s mayor Félix Serrano Toledo, more than half of Ixtepec’s 50 schools were still unusable, with teachers having to hold classes in parks and on private properties as I was observing (Briseño 2018). Five of the 41 municipalities in
the Isthmus could not fully resume normal classes by January, affecting 41,000 children. Ixtepec was among these five.

Similar to what families in Union Hidalgo and Ixhuatán told me, Elida and Jose said “the government never helped us, but we did receive aid from ciudadanos buenos (good citizens, common citizens).” Elida said her family “subsisted” only thanks to a makeshift daycare center that the Comité Ixtepecano installed in their house. The Comité had procured sturdy tent materials from architecture students from far-flung universities in Mexico City and Guanajuato to construct an extremely tiny one-room daycare center for kids whose schools remained closed for the remainder of fall quarter. Neighbors and family members, men as well as women, were conducting “lessons” and activities for the children under the tarp in front of Elida’s home. A sign saying “Comité Ixtepecano Vida Territorio” was propped against the front entrance.

These observations and interviews testify to how the experience of public neglect during a natural disaster reinforced inequality. Social reproduction was strained as families had to rely mainly on their own time and labor to rear and educate children while construction of local schools proceeded at a snail’s pace. This burden appeared to mostly fall to women, as men sought work outside the home, but I also observed adolescent boys (or perhaps college students) volunteering to work with children in Elida’s day care tent. I also met some men who worked as volunteer therapists in Union Hidalgo to tend to children’s emotional needs after the quake, but participants in such efforts were mostly female.
As an already marginalized population was reeling from the trauma and destruction of the two September earthquakes, government neglect enhanced social vulnerability, isolation, and disenfranchisement. At the same time, the local implementation of relief assistance appeared to politicize aid. Respondents all believed that local relief distribution, as meager as it was, reinforced political divisions by prioritizing those who were close to local politicians and bypassing families who were aligned with critical social movements.

However, movement groups analyzed these communal needs and attempted to step in to fill the voids left by public neglect. The Comité Ixtepecano’s approach to the disaster itself, and to these government policies that followed, reinforced the partisanship that movement supporters like Elida and Jose felt in favor of this organization and its claims. The Comité combined the culturally meaningful idea of tequio with meeting material needs in ways that other government institutions could not or would not. Similar groups of volunteers were coming from other parts of Mexico to rebuild with tequio, for example in Union Hidalgo (Mendoza and Valdivieso Parada 2017). In the aftermath of these disasters, efforts like these sustained Elida and Jose’s continued interest in this struggle for cultural revindication and territorial autonomy.

Political science research theorizes how policies construct populations and impart conflicting messages to differentially stratified groups (e.g. Schneider and Ingraham 1990, Schneider and Ingraham 1993, Schneider and Sidney 2009). The meanings of these policies are then internalized in a way that influences people’s attitudes toward government, depending on the type of target population. Though this style of research has
focused mostly on the United States political system and ignores the class dimensions of neoliberalism and imperialism, the case of the Oaxacan earthquake can be interpreted to some extent through this social constructionist prism. However, we need to separate the government’s public declarations of support for the victims and the actual policy responses.

The Mexican state does not openly argue that indigenous people and *campesinos* are undeserving deviants, in the way that many (especially conservative) U.S. politicians explicitly construct criminals, undocumented immigrants, and welfare mothers as stigmatized and undeserving. The Mexican state backs mining and wind energy parks in the name of social progress and economic growth in underdeveloped regions, much like the World Bank’s justifications for structural adjustment schemes. Earthquake relief policies are similarly undertaken in the name of the most marginalized, not in the name of corporations or the rich. However, as I show in this chapter, marginalized people have had many frustrating experiences with the way that government personnel conducted relief and how some construction “builders” even ran off with thousands of dollars in aid money without fulfilling their promise to rebuild 200 victims’ homes in Juchitán (Mexico News Daily 2018).

In the parlance of Schneider and Ingraham (1993: 341), “[e]xperience with policy tells people whether they are atomized individuals who must deal directly with government and bureaucracy to press their own claims or participants in a cooperative process joining with others to solve problems collectively for the common good.” Earthquake relief was a widely recognized public interest goal of Mexico’s federal and
state government, but this policy provided unacknowledged benefits to more powerful capitalist interests. At the same time, poor dependents were often treated as needy, helpless objects. Many residents pointed out to me that an underlying reason for the public show of relief distribution could have been to buy votes in the upcoming elections, which is consistent with Schneider and Ingraham (1993: 336).

Earthquake victims who refused to accept the negative message about themselves in *de jure* government policy and who engaged in “widespread political participation, including conventional forms, as well as disruptive behavior such as demonstrations” (Schneider and Ingraham 1993: 343) were reacting to a combination of corruption and neglect that they subjectively experienced in the wake of disaster. However, I would challenge the assumption that “persons who are powerless and negatively constructed” by policies will mostly turn to “individualized” actions like “riots and protests” if and when they rise up against policies that anger them (Schneider and Ingraham 1993: 342). Once again, as I argued in Chapter III, individualistic models of culture and human behavior tend to dominate Western social science. However, the examples I detail of communal solidarity, shared labor, and volunteerism among earthquake victims themselves attest to how Oaxacan social movements (although sometimes individualistic and/or disruptive) are more often guided by strongly held indigenous values about the common good (e.g. *comunalidad*). Through these culturally specific strategies for relief and social justice, people express their respect for reciprocity, they meet common material needs, and they also protest political corruption.
In the remainder of this chapter, I will provide more accounts of how affiliated social movement organizations in other towns were able to maintain their local support, attract some new allies with resources, and continue advancing their goals of social and environmental justice under the new conditions of privation and insecurity provoked by the earthquake. This was done by organizing families for their rights, for their material necessities, and for their cultural identities in the midst of the earthquake’s destruction.

**Dispossession and Cultural Resistance**

“How could they design a house where you can’t hang a hammock? They’ve even dispossessed us of the right to dream in a hammock.”

*Paulina, resident of Ixhuatán in her mid-20s*  
*(informal communication)*

Rosario Robles was head Secretary of SEDATU from 2015 through 2018 as part of former President Enrique Peña Nieto’s cabinet. As such, she was the federal official in charge of agrarian and urban development throughout the disasters provoked by both the Oaxacan and Mexico City earthquakes. Even though she was a member of the left-reformist PRD (Party of the Democratic Revolution), she served in the conservative PRI government. One year after the earthquake, Robles and Oaxaca Governor Alejandro Murat were giving speeches in Oaxaca City commemorating the rebuilding effort (which Robles called “participatory” and “empowering”). Meanwhile, the Isthmus was experiencing marches, highway blockades, and community forums that protested the state and federal governments’ unkept promises of relief and reconstruction (Matias 2018).

In spite of her being a leading member of a nominally progressive political party, Rosario Robles has been dubbed “persona non grata” by social movements of the
Isthmus. They accused her of abandoning the region during the 2017 earthquakes, but the controversy surrounding her predates this. Since she also strongly supported developing the Isthmus into a wind energy corridor, Robles is criticized by some of my respondents for opening the door to cement companies who enriched themselves by constructing 23 wind energy parks in the Isthmus whose electric power tends to benefit large enterprises and multinationals. This process displaced Zapotec farmers by allowing transnational corporations to access their communal land (bypassing the internationally mandated free, prior, and informed consent of indigenous peoples) all in the name of renewable energy (Dunlap 2018b)—even while families in the region still pay high electricity bills, and many even remain without electricity (Greyl 2015). Robles has also long considered mining a dynamic force for the development of Mexico. She touts how the industry generates income for 2.5 million families, and frames mining development as a fiscal boon to schools, sanitation, and roads.

It is worth mentioning that such advocacy of the Special Economic Zones also encompasses all of the basic arguments used by capital to make resource extraction and increased accumulation palatable to the public. It also further suggests that foreign investment in open-pit mining plus Special Economic Zones that stimulate private investment and trade are part of one single policy agenda that transnational elites are pursuing in the name of the Mexican people who have not benefited from globalization.34

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34 This argument is essentially made in populist terms, in the name of the nation’s most marginalized, because Special Economic Zones have been planned first and foremost in the poorer and more conflict-ridden states of Michoacan, Guerrero, Oaxaca, Chiapas and Veracruz. President Peña Nieto even seized on the major human rights crisis of the 43 disappeared students in Iguala, Guerrero to justify the SEZs in terms of improving Southern Mexico’s development prospects, democratic governance, and stability.
While publicly signing a convention with the governors of Michoacan and Guerrero in the company of their two governors which linked parts of these two states into a Special Economic Zone under the auspices of SEDATU, Rosario Robles spoke of SEZ’s in terms of “promoting prosperity,” and as “the only way to combat poverty and inequality” (Notimex 2015). In the same speech, Robles applauded President Peña Nieto’s Fiscal Reform, which raised taxes on mining companies (SEDATU 2018), for supposedly ending the era of “rich mines and poor pueblos…Today, mining companies, many of them foreign, will pay a tax, which will go directly to mining communities” (Notimex 2015).

Rosario Robles’ ties to construction companies were seen as a marriage between government and industry that was detrimental to the mostly indigenous population who suffered home damage in September 2017. While talking with me in a café in Juchitán, Fernanda Latani named some of the families invested in big construction businesses whom she suggests benefited from the earthquake and from SEDATU’s response: “Lopez Lena, Gurrión, and some others—these are the same bastards who paved the way for the wind energy companies since 2004!”

Construction companies like Lopez Lena and Gurrión are run by powerful Oaxacan families by the same names. These were some of the interests who benefited from the construction of multiple wind energy parks on communal lands in the Isthmus over the past decade, but they also seem to be accumulating capital thanks to state policies in the wake of the 2017 earthquakes. David Gurrión is an owner of gas stations, supermarkets, car dealerships, hotels, ranches, newspapers, and hardware stores.
throughout Oaxaca and other states in Mexico, but he is well-known for his construction company. A native of Juchitán, he joined the political scene under the Governorship of Ulises Ruiz Ortiz—the corrupt and repressive leader whom a protest movement fought in the streets for months to try and unseat in 2006. Local media reports that once Gurrión served as federal deputy and municipal president, he curried favors for his families and other partners in the construction industry, and that his construction company also has a history of defrauding customers who made payments to the store and never received their materials (Indigo Staff 2014).

Government plans to demolish damaged homes and rebuild them with funds from SEDATU and FONDEN have been denounced as a) financially insufficient for the re-construction and re-building, and b) culturally inadequate due to the smaller rooms, homogenous architecture, and standardized construction materials (e.g. concrete) being proposed.

Jorge Alberto Valencia Varrajas and his family have had negative experiences with local government and construction companies ever since their house, store and warehouse were damaged during the earthquake. Jorge works at his parents’ store and warehouse, which are joined to their home in the center of Ciudad Ixtepec. He has a Masters in Economics from the BUAP (Autonomous University of Puebla, Mexico) and sympathizes with the Comité Ixtepecano Vida Territorio. After the damage was surveyed by government fieldworkers, the authorities declared the property a “total loss” (perdida total). When a construction company called Jorge’s father with an order to demolish the home, Mr. Varrajas obstinately refused.
“This building used to be a military barracks during the Porfiriato period—a patrimony of the pueblo. It is more than 100 years old. It gives this neighborhood its aesthetic aspect. We think it can be restored,” said Jorge.

Jorge’s father worked since he was an adolescent to help his grandfather buy this house Jorge’s father received a debit from FONDEN. As I visited Jorge’s property together with a team of architects assembled by the Comité Ixtepecano who were committed to saving and refurbishing the homes of movement supporters, Jorge’s remarks about construction companies and political elites clarified how residents Isthmus were confronting new forms of dispossession.

Jorge suspects that his father received a call with an order to demolish the home because he had been posting information repeatedly about the earthquake on Facebook, but I am unable to verify this particular claim. He said the call came from an engineer named Leo Girón, a local construction company representative. Jorge thought the government would not grant his family a FONDEN debit card, since they were opposed to demolition. However, the Varrajas family did subsequently receive a card in the mail, but there were no funds on it as of the date of our interview (Oct. 25, 2017). A general distrust of economic and political elites, seems to color the reactions of movement supporters like Jorge and his family to the relief policies that have been structured by these elites:

At this point, my parents have received two cards. Today, they’re going to activate them and supposedly within 20 days the cards will contain funds. We have heard some things on Facebook, but we’re not sure if they’re true. For example, we heard that unless we use the debit cards to buy construction materials from certain stores, the cards would not be valid. But we don’t know yet. For now, the resistance [in Ixtepec] is composed of
about 500 of us who don’t want our homes to be demolished. But if at a certain point the government obligates us to buy from a certain provider, maybe relatives of the mayor or his political party, then we would form another movement to be able to buy from whomever we want. Everything is interlinked here, everything is all about money. But I think this movement of resistance has begun [Jorge Varrajas].

Jorge speaks of “resistance” in reference to how the Comité Ixtepecano, who was previously focused on organizing against the Special Economic Zone of the Isthmus and specifically against mining concessions within the municipality of Ixtepec, shifted tactics following the earthquakes to assist families who wanted an alternative to the government’s program of home demolition. Along with several other progressive organizations from Ixtepec and the state of Oaxaca, the Comité helped form the Consejo para la Reconstrucción y Fortalecimiento del Tejido Comunitario de Ciudad Ixtepec (Committee to Reconstruct and Strengthen the Communitarian Fabric of Ixtepec) immediately after the two quakes. This is a team of technicians, engineers, architects, and construction workers who are trying to work with families to save and refurbish homes. They take an oppositional stance toward SEDATU’s policy of marking homes for demolition.

Gerardo de Gyves Ramírez, the same Zapotec architect from Ixtepec whose quotes from a November 2016 interview were included in Chapter V, participates in this Committee because he sees refurbishing traditional homes as part protecting the memories, identity, and lifestyles of his community. Gerardo, along with a fellow Zapotec architect in the Committee to Reconstruct, believe that “federal, state, and municipal authorities are involved in a politics of demolition, not a reconstruction based
in the cultural style of the Isthmus...We believe 95 percent of collapsed houses can be restored” (Manzo 2017).

The Comité Ixtepecano Vida Territorio also invited NGOs and students from Mexico City and Guadalajara to Ixtepec. This enabled them to secure resources and technical advice for those Ixtepecans who comprise the local base of support for their movement against mining and megaprojects. One of the non-local NGOs that began working in the Isthmus, and in Ixtepec alongside the Comité Ixtepecano, is COPEVI: Centro Operacional de Vivienda y Poblamiento, A.C. (Operational Center for Housing and Settlement). This socially committed, multidisciplinary group of technicians has been accompanying communities in not-for-profit disaster relief in marginalized regions of Mexico for four decades. COPEVI engages in construction projects as part of forming “social subjects capable of building...social justice, self-management, solidarity, and democracy,” according to their website (COPEVI 2019). The other is known as Casa Común, an NGO whose focus and methods overlap with those of COPEVI.

I got to know members of COPEVI and Casa Común while traveling with them in and around Ixtepec and observing some of the meetings they conducted along with the Comité. These were mass meetings of around several dozen people each, in November 2017. Townspeople were informed about how they could begin working with COPEVI to restore their home instead of demolishing it, and also why it was culturally and politically important to do so. Secondly, there were individual house meetings that a few members of COPEVI would go on. These visits were conducted with families who signed up for technical advice on how to refurbish their homes, so that volunteer architects and
engineers recruited through the Comité Ixtepecano’s social networks could offer their technical advice, free of charge. I met Jorge Varrajas during one of these visits, via the suggestion of Ruben Valencia of the Comité. After I observed this house visit, Jorge shared his thoughts with me about how residents were being pressured to demolish damaged homes. He expounded on the reasons that families like his were opposing these policies. He also clarified how this related to recapturing Zapotec values such as Guendaliza’a:

In Ixtepec, there are certain construction companies who are in charge of demolition. They are run by militant PRIistas [members of the PRI party] whom we know very well. In Ixtaltepec [a neighboring town], the mayor has his own construction company, and I’m almost sure that he’s behind the home demolitions there. I understand that they are getting paid 80,000 pesos [about $5,000] per home, which of course is very good business for them. Tearing down a home means money. That’s why they want to demolish our homes—with no respect for history or for the rights of the people [Jorge Varrajas interview].

Jorge’s words point to an antagonistic relationship between capital accumulation (in this case, in the form of construction interests who are politically connected) and the internal identity of a predominantly Zapotec community. His perspective was common, if not ubiquitous, among the activists and activist-aligned residents I spoke to in Ciudad Ixtepec. As I pursued this theme in the field, it became apparent that this “vernacular home” which the Comité Ixtepecano was trying to save and restore is much more than a dwelling: it is endowed with the symbolism of collective memory. For many, it carries within it the same rich meanings that are communicated and framed in the meetings, plans of action, and repertoires in their struggle for land and territory. This traditional-style indigenous home links a people to their past. It represents the pride of having
labored and saved enough to own a home that is then further built up piece by piece over many years (as in Susana’s narrative). It stands as a reminder of ancestors who endured and resisted indignities in this very territory.

Isthmus homes have aesthetic qualities which help establish the visual distinctiveness of the place. They are made of adobe, brick and/or what’s called tejavanas de dos aguas (a sloped, gabled roof, often with tiles and palm leaves) (INAFED 2019). They tend to have large rooms and high ceilings in order to resist the intense heat of the region. As with the notions of comunalidad explored in Chapter III, this indigenous idea of territory in Oaxaca is not solely about the natural resources of a given area. Customs, values, foods, ways of relating, and physical structures are also seen as elements of territory. These foundations of place establish the identity and the relationships for a communally-oriented way of life. Traditional Isthmenian homes thus tend to be both functional and visually unique.

At the time of my fieldwork, SEDATU was offering 120,000 pesos (about $800) per each home that was designated as “total loss” to construct homes that would be 54 square meters in size. But COPEVI and Casa Común told families coming to their meetings that with more time, patience, assistance from volunteer architects and engineers, their proposed method of “social reconstruction” could restore measuring 70 square meters in size.

In demanding that homes and buildings be refurbished to conform to the area’s aesthetic character, Sergio Toledo also spoke in the name of place, memory and culture:

I’m not asking on my own behalf, I’m asking on behalf of my city. So that this cultural sensibility is not lost, so that we maintain the life we are used
to. I couldn’t imagine this corner having houses with casting sealings (techo de colado). This landscape wouldn’t be the same. I want this architecture to be maintained and conserved, but with secure technical features—stronger and firmer.

Like other respondents affiliated with social movements of the Isthmus, Sergio and his wife Elida feel that mutual aid on the community level has been eroded over time by individualism and consumerism. They associate the sharing of labor burdens with indigenous values and they see the earthquake as not just a tragedy, but a chance to “rebuild” the social solidarity that once characterized this place:

Many people lament it, but this earthquake gave us the opportunity to rescue many things, such as tequio…I’m 59. When I was young, it was palpable. We would all help a neighbor build his house. We called it hacer un colado, colar el techo (mounting a roof)…The señora would cook a pig for the neighbors who would come help you. This would save a lot of money, and you’d be able to build more. Unfortunately, we have become bombarded by cultural changes through television, causing us to lose this way of living communally (se ha perdido esa manera de vivir). This sentiment had been dormant in us, but now it’s awoken [Jose Sergio Toledo Herrera interview].

Importantly, the economic disaster wrought by the earthquake did not make Sergio any more supportive of Ixtepec’s mining concessions or the Special Economic Zone in general. Sergio still rejects these government-backed megaprojects and see them as contributing to social and ecological injustice, and he also is highly skeptical of political parties who claimed the mantle of earthquake relief: “Whatever project you’re working on, if the political class touches it, they will destroy it. Even those who say they work for the people undermine that [communal] sentiment, because they say ‘I’ll go help, but I’ll only help those from my party.’” In opposition to what they see as this social fracturing
and neoliberal clientelism, Jorge and Elisa gravitate to the community mobilization led by the Comité Ixtepecano. According to Elida:

“They [the Comité Ixtepecano Vida Territorio] are fighters for their people. They defend our people’s lands. They care about their land, roots, all of that. I mean, they just have a whole other perception, and they’ve fought for us to not lose our traditions.”

The tradition of tequio refers to collective, volunteer labor that benefits the community, such as home construction, irrigation, and other works of infrastructure created by villagers themselves. The September 2017 earthquakes intensified the threat of dispossession as multiple levels of government gave powerful companies the green light to physically alter the surroundings and landscape of these places. This process echoes the radical geographic and social changes of the last decade or more, as Isthmus agricultural lands became dotted with thousands of large, concrete, spinning wind power generators that a significant faction of campesinos and community organizations still oppose (Greyl 2015). At the same time, the experience of a largescale natural disaster catalyzed indigenous forms of cooperation that activists had been trying to revive as part of an anti-mine, anti-Special Economic Zone mobilization:

The Sept 7 earthquake destroyed many things, but not our tequio, not our solidarity. That’s when this culture that we have in our being began to flower. We don’t want our homes to be demolished. So we re-started this spirit of cooperation, of tequio, as Zapotecas from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, as Zapotecs of San Jerónimo. These homes represent our parents and grandparents. So that’s where you really start to see this cultural identity, this Guendaliza’a that had been lost, this resistance. We are all like relatives, like family. This is being revived in the Istmo. I’ve noticed it a lot in Ixtepec. Many of us are resisting. We don’t want our homes demolished so we’re helping each other. If I have to go do tequio in someone’s home, I go with much enthusiasm (con mucho gusto, voy) [Jorge Varrajas interview].
By referring to Ixtepec by the name of its patron saint *San Jerónimo*, Jorge further displays his veneration for Ixtepec’s past. These quotes from Jorge, Elida, and Sergio showcase how social movement participants in Ixtepec and Ixhuatán acted collectively with the intention of saving generations-old property from being demolished. This aspect of the post-earthquake “resistance” to neoliberalism and dispossession has prominently involved specialists like architects and engineers working without pay in consultation with activists, families and non-local NGOs to restore homes, while raising the claim that construction companies and the state are complicit in denying people their rights. In so doing, these community members commonly see themselves as retrieving and revendicating a meaningful Isthmus Zapotec custom of *Guendaliza’a*, which entails reciprocal obligations to one’s neighbors and care for one’s surroundings. This form of resilience that helps them maintain group identity while satisfying their material needs.

Both the reconstitution of a group identity and the physical reconstruction of homes enables this population to continue resisting neoliberal capitalist policies and programs in the current era. I noted in Chapter IV that geographer Fernanda Latani had formed two feminist organizations. After the earthquake, she formed a third group, *Colectivo Bibani: Reconstruyendo con Identidad* (“Bibani: Reconstructing with Identity”), which she describes as a small organization dedicated to reconstructing five houses in Ixtepec and collecting the life histories of the women who inhabit them. Like the previous interviewees, Fernanda sees traditional housing as an agent of local resistance (“*la vivienda tradicional como agente de la defensa desde la escala local*”).
She feels strongly about “the right to inhabit a place—the mode of life that we have, in the place we choose to live.”

In Fernanda’s view, this right was violated as residents were unduly pressured to tear down their homes. She claimed that government personnel who knocked on doors to survey damaged properties made hasty and arbitrary decisions as to which houses to mark for demolition:

This view [that our homes could not be restored] was implanted by people, or better put, by personnel, who were not trained, and who did the work of the state, to benefit capital in an almost immediate way. These people who were surveying houses [haciendo foliación de casas] would literally enter and say ‘There’s a small crack? Your home is uninhabitable.”

Throughout her activist work helping women restore their homes, Fernanda also felt that post-earthquake policies ignored the ancestral knowledge of the region’s inhabitants:

Houses of adobe, clay tiles, and clay bricks are part of the anti-seismic understanding that our ancestors of the Istmo and Coast had. They knew how to build dwellings that were earthquake-resistant. A roof made with tiles and parts of a tree that locals call viriguana, 6 meters tall for the heat… It’s not written down in texts and manuals.

The cultural ethos of a group with distinct language, customs and territory, such as the Isthmus Zapotecs, is not written down in formal manuscripts. Perhaps for this reason, it may not be counted as legitimate knowledge by experts and bureaucrats. But, in the original concept of genocide developed in the 1940s, the annihilation of culture is often parcel to the destruction of a social group:

So-called derived needs, are just as necessary to [group life] as the basic physiological needs…[T]he destruction of cultural symbols is genocide [because it] ‘menaces the existence of the social group which exists by virtue of its common culture’ (Moses 2010).

Fernanda pointed to how the logic of state power clashed with cultural identity:
The state exacerbated the anxiety of inhabitants, of people who were hit by a natural phenomenon. They would tell people that their adobe house fell because it was made of mud, even though concrete and cement houses also fell. So this made many people opt to not recuperate their houses, and to discard the little that was left… I think it was Murat [Oaxaca’s Governor] who said that dirt is useless. In devaluing these natural elements our ancestors used to build their houses, the state is trashing the empirical knowledge of our indigenous people.

As described below by Wolfe (2006: 387), expropriation of land has been central to genocides against indigenous people, past and present:

For those indigenous peoples, who continue to define themselves principally through their relationship to land, ‘land is life’—or at least, land is necessary for life. Thus contests for land can be—indeed, often are—contests for life.

Expanding upon this, the contests over saving what’s referred to as la arquitectura vernácula (vernacular architecture) can also be seen as struggles against cultural dispossession, or, as confronting dispossession’s cultural aspects. The demands and actions by social movement organizations in Ixtepec like Comité Ixtepeano, Bibani: Reconstruyendo con Identidad, and Committee to Reconstruct and Strengthen the Communitarian Fabric of Ixtepec are a continuation of what Toledo et al (2015) calls “the struggle for life” in Latin America, and of what Mina Navarro and Claudia Composto (2014) define as “territories in dispute.” Again, these disputes revolve around a notion of “life” which should not be understood only in physiological or economic terms, but in terms of the cultural and social reproduction of rural and indigenous communities.

Communal conflicts around home restoration can be likened to the more commonly understood “indigenous” struggles over land, in spite of the differing geographic and social contexts between the two. Isthmus Zapotecs live on the southern,
mostly flat coastal plains of the Oaxacan Isthmus, and as such are a relatively urbanized people. Many continue to retain links to agriculture, ranching and fishing, but they are less rural than other agrarian or forest-dwelling indigenous groups in Mexico. Isthmus Zapotec lifestyles are certainly more urban than those of native peoples living on the typically remote “aboriginal reserves” in Canada or on “Indian reservations” in the USA. But regardless of their having undergone decades of so-called modernization, land still has important meaning for Isthmus Zapotecs. They are also symbolically, affectively, and materially connected to their traditional homes. This is why “reconstruction” policies which benefited politically connected construction companies incensed many working-class and campesino families, particularly those who were already committed to fighting the cultural and material dispossession that they associate with the Special Economic Zone and its megaprojects.

It is evident that the earthquake transformed a struggle against mining companies into a cultural and material struggle for homes. As long as state policies tend to embody colonization schemes of one kind of another, issues of identity remain prominent. As Fernanda put it: “All of us are against rebuilding a house in the homogenous way the state wants, such as cement, steel, low ceiling, etcetera…This project of gentrification is about homogenizing housing and eliminating local knowledge…People were basically being told ‘Your home has cracks, you gotta go.’”

The policy of demolition, via federal and state funded-debit cards whose funds would end up in the hands of construction companies, began immediately. Fernanda noticed that 90 minutes after the quake, in the town of Ixtaltepec, homes were already
being demolished, and it was difficult for activists to provide any alternative: “We [activists] acted late. We were caught off guard. We might not be able to defend the physical structures, but we are acting to defend the identity, the history that is behind these homes.”

She also claims that the debit cards which families in Ixtepec were receiving were not being accepted in smaller hardware stores, only in chain stores. Tolteca and CEMEX were licensed to accept the cards, but Cruz Azul, and some other local stores, were not: “Cruz Azul is a co-op. It’s the only place that sells one ton of cement for 2,000 pesos. The rest charge 2800, or 3200,” said Fernanda. Tolteca and CEMEX are both transnational corporations headquartered in Monterrey, Mexico. Fernanda added that to receive debit cards as earthquake relief, families had to sign a document agreeing to demolish their home. This testimony is consistent with a pattern of dispossession wherein popular classes are displaced by market forces. In this particular case, the process was set into motion by state “relief” policies.

Rather than devise ways to rebuild and refurbish homes in a universal, affordable, and transparent manner that would have supported local cooperative businesses, state policies helped funnel capital to large enterprises—the same multinationals who benefit from megaprojects. This is accumulation by dispossession in David Harvey’s definition, whereby capital seizes hold of low-cost assets and “immediately turns them to profitable use” (Harvey 2003: 149).

One Zapotec activist man based in the town of Union Hidalgo (“Anonymous”) also spoke of how he saw the state’s response as contributing to the subjugation of the
region: “First the 5 to 6 days, we had no electricity, scarce water…it was a real state of emergency. This brought a situation of panic, psychosis, paranoia…it was very difficult to organize in those conditions.” Like Fernanda in Ixtepec, this anonymous informant also witnessed people being denied debit cards for choosing not to demolish their house, even though this was not an official government policy. In his view, demolition companies, contractors and machine owners were protagonists of this process, while national government regulatory agencies were complicit:

Debris was thrown on side of road, in river banks, and in all the wrong places. Their goal was to move debris as fast as possible so as to earn more money. In Ixtaltepec, PROFEPA [Mexico’s Federal Environmental Protection Agency] inspected the mayor, and gave him a fine which he didn’t pay. Then he continued throwing debris in the same place [Anonymous].

**Pacification vs. the Struggle for Autonomy**

Previous chapters partly touched upon how social movement organizations throughout communities of the Tehuantepec Isthmus had been making claims and contending with dominant political parties over issues of land use, indigenous autonomy, customary fishing rights, corruption, environmental problems, and labor rights.

Social movements and critics of Mexico’s neoliberal state have long since alleged that the state maintains power through patronage, whereby “social assistance programs” are exchanged for votes that keep campesinos, slum dwellers, and indigenous communities confined within institutionalized political channels. Under the Mexican form of clientelism made famous by the PRI, “party or government patrons exchange various goods for political support from groups organized around neighborhood or sectoral lines” (Shefner 2001: 594-595). These are “strategic attempts to channel
decision-making into sanctioned venues, limit alternative organizing, and reinforce state power by incorporating dissident groups and leaders” (Shefner 2001: 594). Further, welfare programs also tend to be used as social control in conjunction with “hard” coercion.

Activists in Juchitán and neighboring towns who speak out publicly and mobilize communities against government-backed projects such as the wind energy corridor have faced assaults, death threats and kidnapping attempts (Morosin forthcoming). Most have little faith that police and government will protect them or even investigate these crimes. A confluence of political and economic interests in the Isthmus have conducted counter-insurgency work (some violent and some non-violent) to neutralize and discredit their most determined opponents, and to dissuade the general population from further identifying with these movements of opposition to neoliberal capitalism (Caro et al 2015: 14, 15).

State functionaries and dominant political parties have invested years of political and economic capital into the Isthmus Special Economic Zone. They are unlikely to share power during a natural disaster with representatives of social groups who are angry about being excluded and displaced by the SEZ, and who don’t wish to be “incorporated” (Shefner 2001) into the state apparatus. As various levels of government undergo an effort to rebuild collapsed structures and to restore social order after the disaster, there is little reason for them to sincerely engage the membership of groups like APOYO, the Grupo Ecologista Zanatepec, the Comité Ixtepecano Vida Territorio, APPJ Radio Totopo, APIIDTT, and others. Sociological conflict theory would lead us to expect that
elite groups would continue trying to contain and outmaneuver grassroots protest groups in the process of seeking to regain legitimacy for their institutions and their policies during a natural disaster and its aftermath.

_Pacification_ refers to the production and reproduction of “more pliable populations through developmental programs while trying to eradicate those who are deemed recalcitrant to liberal rule” (Kienscherf 2016a: 1183). Pacification became an additional mechanism which preserved unequal power relations between hegemonic and subaltern groups in Oaxaca’s Isthmus during this natural disaster, consistent with the Mexican PRI’s history of clientelism. Aid recipients tended to be atomized into individuals awaiting cash transfers, which impeded mass mobilization. As with formal pacification doctrines, the results of government policies and actions were aimed at “maintaining a social order that is formatted for the imperatives of capital accumulation” (Kienscherf 2016a: 1183), while preemptively disarticulating potential responses from the region’s recalcitrant indigenous activists.

As is often the case, pacification was not completely successful, because spontaneous outpourings of protest were still able to emerge, and because formal movement organizations carried out a successful praxis of communal mobilization from an autonomous standpoint. These actions from below managed to challenge certain aspects of state power during this social breach in public order that unfolded during the disaster period of late 2017.

Alfonso Arenas Lopez is an engineering student who currently lives in his native town of Union Hidalgo. He is a founding member of _Colectivo Binni Cubi_ (meaning
“new people collective” in Zapotec), a group of five volunteers whose goal is to “foment and fortify our indigenous Zapotec culture” as Alfonso put it during an interview in December of 2017. The group accomplishes this mission through the production of music, a radio station (*La Otra Radio*) documentaries, murals, poetry, and the clean-up of public spaces, among other projects (see https://sites.google.com/site/lubilunisa/). They are also consistent opponents, on social and ecological grounds, of Union Hidalgo’s existing wind farms and of the Gunaa Sicarú Windfarm Project which a French company proposes to construct (Critchley 2017).

Alfonso was dismayed upon observing that “nobody was organized,” i.e. municipal authorities made little effort to go out, learn the needs of the people, gather people with skills and ability to help, and implement a community-based plan for reconstruction. This work fell to civilian groups and movement activists who had the networks and the volition to “go out, talk to people, and learn.” In Alfonso’s view, the local government’s promises of dispensing cash relief pacified people into adopting a welfare recipient mentality, instead of mobilizing them to help one another.

Whereas the government would not carefully go from house to house to arrange for the distribution of goods universally, small groups of volunteers who were already familiar with the community (and viewed as trustworthy by most) would do so instead. For example, while staying at the home of *Colectivo Binni Cubi* founding member Jose Arenas Lopez (Alfonso’s older brother), I asked Jose if all the heavy plastic sheets of laminate that I saw in his backyard were for fixing his roof. He said that these had been collected as donations from friends in Mexico City. Jose and Alfonso were delivering
these materials to families in Union Hidalgo during house visits, which I attended with Jose. The Collective used one pick-up truck that constantly needed repairs and gas, which members would pay for out of pocket.

I also observed *Colectivo Bini Cubi* meeting with women to help them raise money to repair their bread ovens which had been damaged in the earthquake. They viewed this as a way of “reactivating the local economy” by supporting and recognizing the subsistence production of women who depend on home ovens to bake *tortillas* and *totopos* for sale and consumption. *Colectivo Bini Cubi* members compiled a list of over 200 women who did not receive the aid they were promised for their artisanal ovens and domestic kitchens, and gathered these women for public events in the town square, while committing to raise funds to help these families.

“The Anonymous” discussed how the presence of the army and marines in the Isthmus had already been substantial in the decades since wind parks arrived, but that this militarization increased after the earthquake:

> They arrive and they install themselves, right? In Matias Romero, Ixtepec, San Dionisio del Mar, here at checkpoints on the Panamerican Highway, in Ixhuatán right next to the community eatery that was set up after the earthquake…wherever you turn, there is a lot of military presence. It’s really impressive because the people began to see it as something familiar. Socially, the military is very permeated. Maybe they don’t have some pre-planned strategy of occupation, but they’re everywhere. I don’t know what you would call that.

“The Anonymous” perceives that the normalization of a military presence will contribute to dis-integrating collective action by earthquake survivors. He believes that the state’s “paternalist attitude” inhibits communal organization. He went on to say:
The army takes on an attitude of ‘assistance’, right? An emergency plan. The army is a face of the state, and so is the municipal government. The municipal government assumes no responsibility, because they argue that earthquakes were a phenomenon beyond their control that couldn’t be foreseen. So they detained trucks at the entry of the town of people who had come to donate goods. They placed obstacles on people who came from outside to offer relief…But the army were the ones dispensing aid, distributing water, tents…So, people who were in a state of fear and panic viewed this as something beneficent, right? This marginalizes people to take a passive and receptive attitude. This is something that propitiates, appeases. This is how we get the disarticulation of social movements.

To movement activists, it was clear that this military force could one day be used against the people in the region who oppose the privatization of space and natural resources that the Special Economic Zone would propel. They had been predicting that the government would continue to “contain social protest” against the SEZ because “the government knows there will be resistance to these megaprojects” (Comité Ixtepecano /Espacio de Mujeres 2016). In recent memory, police and soldiers had violently removed protestors from the Bii Hioxo wind park in Juchitán, and activists endured a campaign of armed threats from private security forces and paramilitaries (Dunlap 2018a). Militarization and increased use of force against community leaders in the region, especially against those who speak for populations harmed by megaprojects, have been well documented over the past several years by international human rights organizations (e.g. Peace Brigades International 2014).

The post-earthquake deployment of troops to political hotbeds of resistance (e.g. Juchitán, Union Hidalgo, Ixtepec) conjured up these kinds of disturbing memories for anti-wind farm and anti-mine activists based in these communities. Some activists utilized communication technologies and their online followings to rally social solidarity.
(local and extra-local) and to expose the extent of neglect. Immediately after the earthquake, Manuel Ruiz, Coordinator at the Preparatoria Jose Martí high school in Ixhuatán, published a blog with chronicles and reports about the earthquake and its social fallout. While checking this blog from my desk in Riverside, California after the earthquake, I would find a new blog entry each day that depicted the situation in very moving terms characteristic of Manuel’s poetic writing and communication style. These *communiques* were eventually published into a book entitled *Replicas de Solidaridad: Crónicas del terremoto y la reconstrucción en el Istmo de Tehuantepec* (“Aftershocks of Solidarity: Chronicles of the earthquake and reconstruction in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec”) (Preparatoria Jose Martí 2017). The Prepa Jose Martí co-sponsored community forums upon the release of the book in several towns of the Isthmus, and Manuel’s writings on the topic were picked up by local, national and independent media outlets. This served to re-frame the discussion around themes of dispossession, indigenous rights, militarization, and resistance to government-backed megaprojects.

On Day 7 after the quake, Manuel sent another online *communique* which associated social welfare handouts, militarization and corporate colonization as a mode of neoliberal governance:

Communitarianism is waning with the distribution of government donations to individuals (*despensas*)…Politicians fulfill the role of dividing the people and capital benefits. Fractured communities are easy to conquer, to implement transnational projects. This is all tilling the way for the approval of the Special Economic Zones (Preparatoria Jose Martí 2017: 25).
In another chapter of the same book, Manuel thanked supporters and friends in Mexico and around the world for their financial contributions to the Prepa Jose Martí via PayPal. But he also took care to add:

We have no gratitude at all to the municipal government and the state/federal authorities. Despite that the municipal president’s father worked with our institution for 30 years, and the councilor of education graduated from our school, nobody has come by to check on us, much less to offer help…Despite being notified multiple times, they never came to survey the damage to our school. They couldn’t even make themselves useful to come and ask us to move the students to a safer building…(Prepa Jose Martí 2017: 69).

The disbursement of government aid during the earthquake proceeded according to political motives rather than humanitarian aims. More generally, liberal forms of social control are calibrated to affect certain individuals and spaces over others. This again demonstrates how “an analytic of pacification allows us to conceptualize the highly selective allocation of coercive and consensual social control” (Kienscherf 2016a: 1180). Prepa Jose Martí, as a participating member of APOYO which coordinates mobilizations across the Isthmus, is well known for being one of the most vocal institutions for communal land rights and against the Special Economic Zone. In 2015 they led a march in Ixhuatán that openly denounced local politicians for their support of the wind energy industry, which resulted in a tense period of vandalism and death threats against the school and its coordinators [Manuel Antonio Ruiz interview].

As I attended and supported fundraisers for the Prepa Jose Martí in fall of 2017, I learned that the school was being reconstructed completely by volunteer labor (which I participated in) without any financial support from any government agencies. In spite of all the community-oriented labor and projects that the students and teachers carry out,
this small school was left to fend for itself. They were even left with thousands of dollars of debt to the truck operator who picked up and disposed of the concrete debris that remained of its collapsed walls. These are the experiences which embolden Manuel to write that “Fractured communities are easy to conquer.”

Circumstances of neglect, dispossession, and pacification impeded independent social organization, according to “Anonymous,” but not completely:

The social movement hadn’t predicted this kind of scenario. There was no pre-existing program on how to react to an earthquake. People who are minimally organized, like the comuneros assembly, or collectives… acted for the common good by gathering relief donations, and helping people…

He observed that only groups who were already cohesive were able to maneuver throughout several days of chaos. This point aligns with my field observations during the aftermath of the earthquake. Volunteer groups and independent activists were themselves undergoing the personal trauma and hardship of having their homes damaged or destroyed. Flowing from their cultural, organizational and ideological commitment to continue existing as self-determined people in their own territory, these groups continued (and modified) their strategies for the defense of land, water, rights and territory.

CONCLUSIONS: RECONSTRUCTION AND RESILIENCE

This chapter has provided support for my initial contention that disaster is not just a physical event, but a social occurrence. Early sociological studies and definitions of disaster tended to be functionalist (e.g. Fritz 1961). They defined disasters as originating in ecosystems and as occurring suddenly, bringing damage to property and lives. This view saw natural disasters as consensus crises that would be restored by governments with an interest in ameliorating this damage. Newer perspectives proceeded from the
notion that disasters are social products. For example, a natural event such as an earthquake or hurricane is not a “disaster” unless the built environment and social system are vulnerable. Blaikie et al (1994) argue that actual disasters originate in social conditions which may be quite distant from an earthquake itself. Larger social forces such as the globalization of capitalism, power inequities in a region, underdevelopment, environmental degradation, and the decisions of government elites thus make a variety of disasters inevitable. In other words, “disasters are part of a set of negative externalities that occur as a consequence of larger political-economic trends and that must be explained by reference to those forces” (Tierney 2007: 510). This is the approach I have taken in analyzing Oaxaca’s 2017 earthquake in the Istmo.

Systematic home demolition in exchange for an $800 government check seems to mirror the geographic, environmental and political “shocks” that open-pit mining would bring to this region. To indigenous activists already critical of state institutions, and who were mobilizing against the Special Economic Zone prior to the earthquake, the hurried and profit-driven manner in which home “reconstruction” was being carried out by an array of companies and government agencies represented a new form of displacement. This entailed the physical demolition of historical property, as well as cultural erasure of communal memories and ways of working together that have been a source of identity and resilience for Zapotecs of the Isthmus.

Together with this structural-conflict perspective on disasters, I also find it valuable to view the case of the Isthmus earthquake through the lens of ethnomethodology: disasters can be interpreted as “breaching events” which reveal the
real structure of the social order. This structure is more likely to be taken for granted during “normal times,” but the “breach” or “jolt” provided by a disaster can help clarify the actual power relations in a society. It can propel social conflict between elites and subordinates, as well as foment cooperation and solidarity on a local or intercommunal level. Tiernrey (2007: 512) recalls that during the 1985 Mexico City earthquake, “rapid and effective self-help measures undertaken by victims themselves stood in stark constrast to the sluggish governmental response,” and that this contrast hastened the eventual downfall of the PRI’s legitimacy.

Similarly, in the eyes of many Isthmus residents, the neglect and dispossession embodied in the government response to the earthquake in late 2017 further revealed the clientelism arbitrary privatization of life that typifies Oaxaca’s very stratified social order. Activists viewed military presence and unequally distributed social welfare programs as forms of pacification (although this specific word is one that I chose to represent their sentiments and the function of government policies, not one that they articulated). They attempted to surmount these obstacles by revindicating tequio/ Guendaliza’a and carrying out communal self-help.

The social movement response(s) to the disaster took different forms depending on the local context of the damage, and the existing networks of actors available for mobilization, in each community. In Ixtepec, the Comité Ixtepecano helped form a larger Consejo para la Reconstrucción y Fortalecimiento del Tejido Comunitario de Ciudad Ixtepec (Committee to Reconstruct and Strengthen the Communitarian Fabric of Ixtepec). They deployed specialists to damaged homes in order to accompany families in the
rebuilding process, which was framed as culturally essential to the identity of Ixtepec’s common Zapotec residents. These self-organized movement networks hosted national NGOs like Casa Común and COPEVI who have experience conducting relief work in earthquake-impacted regions of Mexico and Latin America through a social justice lens. The Comité Ixtepecano enlisted university students from central Mexico, to support the basic needs of the population who opted to volunteer out of political solidarity.

*Colectivo Bibani: Reconstructing with Identity* was formed in Ixtepec by Fernanda Latani Mendez and several of her feminist colleagues to rebuild five women’s homes while documenting the life stories of these women. As a small self-organized collective of geographers, architects, and communication specialists, *Bibani* stands as an interesting contemporary and indigenous example of women’s roles in volunteer-based disaster recovery work (Neal & Phillips 1990; Enarson & Morrow 1998; Enarson 2000, 2002). While advancing radical critiques of state power, capital and sexism, women like Fernanda participate in and form multiple organizations that aim to revendicate indigenous ancestral knowledge.

In Union Hidalgo, *Colectivo Binni Cubi* and *comunero* assemblies who had marched to oppose the wind energy park two weeks prior to the earthquake were now raising donations to help women rebuild their kitchens and ovens.

If the earthquake was socially constructed by institutions with hegemonic power, it was also socially constructed/re-framed by organizations of *campesinos*, environmentalists and indigenous cultural collectives. The experiences of prior marginalization and of prior political organizing shaped the lens through which these
grassroots organizations viewed this disaster. In reacting to what Walsh (1981) calls “suddenly imposed major grievances,” social movement organizations can sustain or amplify discontent while provoking organized protests against government policies and simultaneously filling the gaps left by negligent or inefficient government authorities. The inequalities which they set out to challenge tend to be made more visible after a disaster provokes a “breach” in daily life.

Before concluding our interview and heading off to sell her tortillas, Susana drew a lesson about the suffering she went through. She was optimistic about Ixtepec’s people remaining firm in their rejection of mines and other government oppression:

At least we can be thankful that all of this reminded us of how we need to support one another and stay united. It’s the same with the mines: If we don’t stay united, they will come in and do whatever they want. But if we defend what’s ours, and more than that, if we defend that which belongs to the future generations, if we learn to raise our voice and say ‘enough’ (levantar la voz y decir basta), we can put a stop to the “arbitrariness” in how they treat us (las arbitraridades… Tenemos voz para ser escuchados).

Yolanda said that Ixhuatán’s proximity to the fishing village of San Francisco del Mar Pueblo Viejo helped guarantee that these communities at least did not lack fresh fish to eat in the immediate days following the disaster. She worried that since “the government has no sustainable development plan for our natural resources,” mining projects would eventually sacrifice the region’s food sovereignty:

The Special Economic Zone will bring more poverty. Foreign capital will benefit. With so much contamination, the people here will develop many health problems, cancer, etc. This will have repercussions on our food supply, mainly the sea, the fruits…
Oaxaca’s earthquake and aftershocks brought these issues into relief for broader numbers of people. These are surely not the only kinds of responses and conversations that villagers had in the midst of the disaster. But, in a tumultuous year of natural disasters throughout Mexico in 2017, these Oaxacan voices represent an important cross-section of society that should not be forgotten.

Disasters are crises that can serve as opportunities for social classes and organizations of very different kinds to promote the narratives, policies and modes of action that correspond to their social position and to their perceived interests. The well-known quote “Never let a good crisis go to waste,” often mistakenly attributed to Winston Churchill, applies to how the Mexican government seized on the disaster to reinforce a social order that benefits political and economic elites. It also reflects the ways in which social movements, more or less immediately, acted throughout the crisis to defend communal forms of landownership (and homeownership) so as to strengthen their position in the territorial battles to come against the Trans-Isthmus Corridor/SEZ.

In the Preparatoria Jose Martí’s blog, Day 2 after quake, Manuel published a poignant communique which concluded by framing the calamity of the September 7 earthquake as a new stage of collective action: “Now is the time for our indigenous peoples. It’s time to proclaim our autonomy and reconstruct our pueblos that have existed for centuries” (Preparatoria Jose Martí 2017: 9).

The physical devastation, psychic insecurity and material privation left by the earthquake and aggravated by the government response did not extinguish the communal spirit and flexible resourcefulness of organized radical networks in the Isthmus. It is too
soon to determine which roles these various indigenous organizations will have ended up playing in reconstruction. We cannot know whether their earthquake relief work will prove pivotal in blocking the expansion of the Special Economic Zone into the Tehuantepec Isthmus.

But we know that indigenous, feminist, and territorial activism in this politicized, geostrategic region of Mesoamerica was not buried among the rubble and debris. It was not extinguished by neoliberal disaster statecraft. In the midst of the destruction, strategic repertoires were revised while critiques of power relations were sharpened. Networks (and cultures) of solidarity were drawn upon and further expanded. At least up until this point, *la lucha por la vida sigue*: the struggle for life continues.
CONCLUSION: RESEARCH QUESTIONS RE-VISITED

Proceeding from a broad view of how the globalization of capital generates social and environmental problems on a world scale, I began this project by trying to understand indigenous opposition to the Special Economic Zone in Oaxaca’s Isthmus of Tehuantepec. In the course of the research, I became more conscious of the role that ethnic identities can play in motivating and shaping resistance, in conjunction with environmental values that are etched into the collective memories/collective culture of a place. And, as every movement has internal contradictions related to inter/intra communal tensions, I identified how gender relations and gendered discourse can advance (as well as limit) the goals of environmental justice movements. These findings address theoretical debates among four broad groups of scholars: 1) those concerned with critical studies of globalization and anti-systemic movements; 2) scholars focusing on threat-based mobilizations and/or the role of culture in social movements; 3) feminist scholars, especially those studying Zapotec women or indigenous feminism; and 4) environmental sociologists and others troubled by the social impacts and social construction of natural disasters. Here I will speak to how this case advances these sub-areas, as well as to some ways in which it connects them.

This dissertation’s empirical and theoretical narrative began on the macro level, to which I now return. Critical historical scholars of the world-system have brought the social into conversation with ecology by focusing on how capitalism rests on the continual appropriation of the “four cheaps”: cheap food, fuel, labor and energy (Moore 2011, 2015). This case extends this analysis by focusing on how globalization’s “race for
resources” in the early 21st century (Bunker and Ciccantell 2005), spurred by in great part by the Chinese and Indian demand for minerals and raw materials (Veltmeyer and Petras 2014), is creating a scramble for raw materials that traverses the globe.

The globalization of resource extraction is only made possible by institutional, financial, and political changes. This mainly and most consistently benefits blocs of transnational capital. It is this section of investors who are able to forge, and make use of, specifically transnational (semi-borderless) networks of extraction, production, trade, and accumulation (e.g. Robinson 2008, 2004). Mexico’s opening of its labor reserves and food production to transnational and U.S.-based capital via the NAFTA treaty in 1994 is well-known, but the role of its mining reforms has been a more recent problem that is only beginning to receive scholarly attention.

As the contemporary world-system depends ever more heavily on dwindling supplies of the “four cheaps,” this requires further enclosures of the commons. We then see the gradual privatization and exploitation of what used to be communally managed (or, socially owned) natural goods (“bienes comunales”). The Isthmus of Tehuantepec is home to the greatest biodiversity in Mexico, as well as a cultural diversity that is sustained by a mostly communal structure of land management. National and transnational capital have long viewed the Isthmus as a potential hub for wind energy, hydroelectric power, inter-oceanic transport, timber, oil, and now, mining. As accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2003) accompanies the extraction of these natural resources for the world market, this aggravates social and environmental violence (Narchi 2014).
The Isthmus is but one case in Mexico that illustrates how economic diversification guided primarily by speculative profit is phasing out smallscale agricultural production. In the place of fishing, ranching, fruit production and field crops comes capital-intensive industry such as wind farms, mining, oil refining and power transmission lines. Since very few local producers and workers are poised to take advantage of these opportunities for growth, contracts and benefits typically accrue to outsiders or foreigners with capital. Local landowners are paid by transnationals for the use of fields and coastlines that become closed off to agriculture and fishing activity. Food sovereignty of the region is negatively impacted, as more food must be imported instead of bought and sold in local markets. Open-pit mining for gold particularly displays the power asymmetries between core and peripheral zones of the world-economy, as the health and water supplies are sacrificed for the benefit of jewelry production whose value is mostly appropriated by firms and retailers based in the global north (Tetreault 2014a, 2014b, 2015). The role of mostly Canadian-based mining corporations and their Mexican subsidiaries has been analyzed (e.g. Tetreault 2015), but the arrival of mining capital to the Isthmus region has not yet been analyzed by social scientists.

Socio-environmental conflicts in the Tehuantepec Isthmus illustrate how the globalization of capital relates to anti-systemic movements. Wind farms (like dams) also generate cheap electricity for large factories in the Isthmus and in Mexico owned by transnationals, while reshaping the natural landscape and closing off campesino families’ access to the land. In short, our positionality comes back into play once we appreciate
that “we are all implicated” in global capitalism’s environmental violence (Dunlap 2018a, 2018b).

These movements have an important role to play in staving off the effects of the global environmental crisis (Foster et al 2011) by blocking capital’s access to at least some of the four cheaps. The “defense of territory” by indigenous/campesino movements (Navarro and Composto 2014) is one form that this can take, but the race for the “four cheaps” does not automatically generate organized opposition at the local level. Threat-based mobilizations proceed through existing cultural structures and through the politics of place. Even though megaprojects are promoted by governments in the name of diminishing poverty and strengthening communities, the interpretive frames and strategies of SMOs can undermine these neoliberal policies as communities act to prevent dispossession of their livelihoods and cultures. This discussion connects my research to political sociologists who debate the role of (local) culture in social movements. I have intervened in this literature by reconceptualizing the nature and function of SMO framing in several ways, condensed below.

To begin, interpretive frames are social products at least as much as they spring from the entrepreneurial initiative and rationality of SMOs. This case leads me to view framing as a social process that is contingent on group-level structures, pre-existing social relations, and meaningful historical and everyday experiences (e.g. of place, class or ethnicity). Each of these variables can spur (or obstruct) movement emergence. I avoid labeling the framing process as a mostly “rational” enterprise seems to graft a Western model of political behavior onto non-Western communities. Doing so would overestimate
the freedom of movement organizers to draw from outside their own cultural traditions when making claims and devising repertoires.

Further, I use this case to argue that “frames” are embedded in structures of inequality. This is because SMOs and their audiences are entrenched within historically determined social hierarchies and contexts. When a geographic region shares a collective culture based on its subordinated relation to the state, or when many of its residents can be won by SMOs to see themselves in such a way, movement tactics and frames that reinforce this culture are likely to be effective in drawing participation from audiences and in building alliances, in spite of sociopolitical differences between these communities and groups. This explains how frames that are in synch with what Horton (2010: 65) calls an audience’s “core identities and valued sense of difference” can provoke mobilization against seemingly much more powerful adversaries, notwithstanding the risk of political repression.

Adding to these literatures on how culture interacts with collective action frames, I introduce native-Oaxacan ideas (comunalidad, Guendaliza’a) into the analytical strategy. To quote a major theorist of comunalidad, the anti-SEZ movement in the Tehuantepec Isthmus bases its “strategies of resistance...in the collective, in shared labor, and in respect for their community elders” (Luna 2010). By critically engaging how indigenous cosmovisions are meaningful to participants, this case shows that effective frames appeal not just to cognitive ideas, but to the material aspects of culture.

Scholars have long shown how disruption of daily routines, and the potential disruption of cultures that are understood as historically unique and valiant, can provoke
collective contention. But just as oppositional consciousness does not spontaneously arise as a result of mobilization, the scattered elements of oppositional culture do not mechanically spawn organized resistance to neoliberal state policies. For this to happen, “the discontent of individuals must be transformed into the shared grievances of group participants with some degree of a collective identity” (Brockett 2007: 67). Cultural elements need to be focused on who is being affected, and harnessed to target who is to blame. It is the intervention of politically sophisticated, culturally literate, technologically-inclined activists that draws forth, directs and further shapes oppositional consciousness in today’s Isthmus. Organizations like APOYO are highly competent in dialogue, storytelling, and patient consensus-building. This is certainly not unique to this region of Mexico, but part of what seems to influence this mobilization has been the region’s well-documented history of rebellion, particularly by the more dominant Zapotecs (Campbell and Binford 1993, Campbell 1994, Rubin 1994, Rubin 1997).

The organizations I have studied in the field act as “repositories of knowledge of particular routines” (Tarrow 1998: 20) through a highly social, interactional process. They work to reinforce oppositional elements in “routines” that were already extant in the local culture. These include collective memories of previous political resistance by oppressed and exploited groups, the larger history of agrarian struggles in this region, and even the dialogical style of oral communication that is typical at meetings. All of these are cultural attributes that are broadly held by indigenous groups in the Isthmus, particularly fishermen and other small-scale producers that are all members of indigenous ethnicities. Whether or not they fluently speak an indigenous language, they identify with
a collective culture that is different than that of the Mexican state whose mainstream institutions are promoting the commodification of “natural resources” and the privatization of social property. Again, this is the importance of creatively grounding movement discourse and strategies in comunalidad and Guendaliza’a (the latter being specific to the Zapotecs of the Isthmus).

What might these results teach us about movement outcomes? The framing being used by the groups I studied has gotten a supportive response from the target audience of fishermen, campesinos and thousands of other impacted community members in multiple towns and hamlets between 2015 and 2017. A pre-emptive mobilization has been launched against mining, which is arguably the most destructive industry to enter the Isthmus after decades of timber companies, wind farms, trains, dams, factories, oil refining and wind turbines. Five thousand people marched on the Panamerican highway in a small, calm town in November of 2016 against the very idea of becoming a mining community. A large portion of Zanatepec mobilized for this march, in spite of the national government’s promises that mining benefits rural communities.

The movement’s calls to action have been heeded up to this point have consistently echoed the ethnic and political traditions of this population. Organizations stress how this collective culture or “way of life” defines their material interests as in conflict with extractive capitalism’s mantra of endless growth. Judging from dozens of hours of conversations, interviews, and observed meetings, my respondents overwhelmingly interpret the Isthmus Special Economic Zone not as a potential boon to their livelihoods, but as an external threat to the way they have lived their lives up to this
point. This is because they view the SEZ through the lens of a pre-existing pan-indigenous culture that values territorial autonomy, sustainability, and reciprocity, and because SMOs have strategically amplified those frames. Any number of factors have the potential to extinguish this movement in the future, such as natural disasters, higher repression, or better offers from the state and corporations in exchange for supporting the megaprojects. But the emergence of such a diverse preventive movement is an achievement to learn from.

Next, this dissertation connects to a third set of theoretical debates which revolve around the study of gender. Ethnicity and class are important axes of inequality, but they cannot be properly analyzed without reference to embodied, gendered social relations. While politically confronting the threat of dispossession, communities are also pushed to redefine who they are. Collective identity is not static and primordial; it is reframed and reinterpreted in relation with the larger shocks produced by capitalist penetration. In the same manner that social reproduction patterns are strained and re-shaped by environmental threats, so too are gender relations undergoing flux in indigenous regions and throughout Mexico and Latin America. As sociologist Nancy Naples commented after one of my preliminary presentations on this topic at an American Sociological Association conference, gender is an emergent phenomenon in all social settings. I demonstrate my agreement with this by attempting to show that movements for the defense of territory, even in matrifocal indigenous communities, instantiate gendered roles, assumptions and discourses in their micro-political processes. I sum up these arguments and their connection to feminist literatures in the following four pages.
The manner in which indigeneity gets articulated “is a contingent product of global articulation and local agency” (Altamirano-Jiménez 2013: 3). “Local agency” is complex because there is no homogenous “indigenous” or even “Isthmus Zapotec” culture: there are class, ethnic and gender contradictions in the Isthmus territories that global capitalism is increasing its access to. This particular field site offered a rich empirical case for understanding how people’s differential/overlapping locations in the social structure can furnish them with different frames, strategies and interpretations of “their” culture. In detailing why and how feminist collectives and feminist organizers are contributing in their own ways to the movement for the defense of life and territory, we can better grasp why the defense of life and nature from extractive capitalism is a gendered affair dependent upon interactions between the local and the global.

Connecting prior anthropological research on Tehuantepec Isthmus gender relations to feminist sociology, I conceptualize matriarchy (el matriarcado) as its own inequality regime (Acker 2006). Dominant ideas in this region about women’s centrality to culture can legitimize women’s activism to a point, but these ideas also pull a veil over multiple forms of inter-communal violence. This is why matriarcado is problematized by many feminists on the ground. The Isthmus has frequently been portrayed as a kind of matriarchal utopia with emancipated social and sexual relations. The Zapotecs of the Isthmus practice a more egalitarian set of ideas and social relations with regards to gender, where femininity is revered as a strong and desirable trait and male homosexuality is tolerated (Mirandé 2016). Over time, many scholars have concluded that the trope of matriarchy has been exaggerated to serve outside agendas of
either colonialist exoticization or utopian idealization, and more Zapotec women researchers have been arguing this as well. Local women’s voices have been all too often completely left out of feminist writings about the Isthmus, while the ideal of Juchitán’s “women warriors” also strangely relegated men and men’s subjectivities to the background. I try to atone for this by directly asking men and women connected to the movement their views on the gender dynamics within territorial activism.

I find that in spite of a matrifocal culture that symbolically centers femininity, women are not the undisputed “leaders” of resistance movements. The strategic framing of resistance organizations lays claim to indigenous forms of maternalism, such as the reverence for “Mother Earth” and opposition to extractivism as a masculine system that unsustainably exploits the natural commons. At the same time, interviews suggested that this very matriarchal ideology makes it taboo to tackle women’s continuing subordination in the Isthmus. This poses the need for future research to help determine the conditions under which a social movement’s efforts to reshape and resist one form of subjugation may end up reproducing others.

Movements that resist certain forms of inequality may be constrained by other social hierarchies at the same time. This can lead new organizations to form, as different members of the same movement disagree on which issues are most pressing. Listening to the detailed life experiences of women convinced me that a gender order favoring men’s interests still exists, but this gender order is legitimated in a different way than Western patriarchy. It is more typically justified by benevolent views about women’s “fundamental” roles in matrilineal households and community life.
In seeing how the matriarchy myth reproduces what my respondent Angeles calls “hidden” forms of patriarchy, I named these hidden oppressions as benevolent sexism, unpaid community labor, unpaid household labor, and deference to males in social situations. Those women I interviewed who were most committed to resisting neoliberalism also expounded about how the private machismo in Juchitán’s artistic and leftist political scene today is continuous with that of the COCEI, the region’s Zapotec nationalist party of the early 1980s. In spite of their differing levels of educational attainment, socio-economic trajectory, and political involvement, the five female respondents in Chapter V voice support for feminism while connecting gender to larger environmental, cultural and political concerns. They seem to have first encountered feminism in the course of struggling for political, economic and cultural rights. This again speaks to how movements that begin as a fight for land and territory may be pushed to take up broader issues of social emancipation.

I attribute these differences of opinion and strategy to participants’ diverse locations in the variegated, complex social space of the Isthmus. In this social movement community, people’s prior activist experiences, ages, educational levels, occupations, class backgrounds, and ethnicities differ as well as overlap. These intersecting statuses are themselves rooted in the social and production relations of the Tehuantepec Isthmus. Unlike many other indigenous regions, the Istmo has undergone modernization as it has become more integrated with global networks of extraction, production and distribution. Drawing on previous research, I have explained how the region is embarking on a new phase of intensified commercialization at least since the turn of the century. In this
context, some women’s activist histories and more advanced educational backgrounds have placed them in a better position to articulate and spread a more radical indigenous feminist position.

While most women did not explicitly describe gender as an axis of inequality that constrained their life chances, eight women strongly critiqued gender discrimination. These were young women (from mid 20s to late 30s) that had gained political experience and/or theoretical knowledge while living in cities, or traveling to numerous communities to attend and lead themed workshops. These women were more likely to speak at length about how “matriarchy” is a stereotype that actually silences and de-politicizes women, and that machismo is a deep problem within social movement cultures. They viewed their gender identities as centrally intertwined with the defense of territory and with human rights activism. This addresses how suffering, as well as agency, for Zapotec women can be found at the bodily, household and communal levels:

The body is the first place where women experience exploitation as well as sexual and domestic violence. Home is also a contested political space. It is the space where indigenous women exercise power through their traditional roles as mothers, caregivers, and wives. At the same time, it is the space where they are dominated, exploited, and subjected to violence…Place is the space containing relations to nature and to people. (Altamirano-Jiménez 2013: 65).

Just as the home can be empowering or limiting to women depending on the context, my research suggests that different classes and generations of men and women embrace distinct forms of movement participation. Further, these forms of participation are in line with the common-sense notions of society that their social position makes available and apparent to them. Male Isthmus activists generally voice favorable views about women’s
right to participate in society and in social movements. The older men I interviewed believed that machismo was becoming a thing of the past. This is a somewhat self-serving position based on the fact that women’s labor and women’s psychic deference to men’s desires remains hidden and normalized under the matriarchy myth. Only a few younger men (and even fewer older men) perceived machismo as an ongoing problem to be tackled within their communities. In sum, the movement’s discursive and practical relation to feminist frames is multifaceted and contradictory. Both the essentialist view that naturalizes women’s role as communal caretakers, and a more deconstructionist view that looks to transcend gender as a fixed category, co-exist within the movement of resistance to megaprojects.

Further, just as indigenous feminists in this region approach their own culture as something that can be re-thought and re-shaped, they also critique feminist constructs so as to adjust them to their own context and needs. This is similar to how Uma Narayan’s (1997) postcolonial feminism takes inspiration from her own Indian culture while also confronting the nationalist justifications for Hindu patriarchy that she grew up hearing. For example, though Nashieli accepted the feminist moniker after some hesitation, she said she was cautious about adopting Western values (or any set of universal values, including feminism) as a dogma. Her statement that “You speak from where you’re situated, from where your context comes in, from your perception—that’s where you start” suggests why the claims and goals of individual activists (even those who generally oppose the SEZ and take an anti-assimilationist stance towards the state) would differ by attributes like their gender, class, and biographical experiences. In my view, this speaks to
the need for unified leadership that can consciously involve people in fighting gender oppression while at the same time as confronting the state, transnational capital, and the allure of consumerist/individualist culture.

My findings also connect to the environmental sociology literature around how social questions of power are built into the way groups of people are impacted by (and respond to) natural disasters. This research project allowed me to directly observe how the social aspects of natural disasters relate to contested processes of dispossession and privatization. The experience of the Oaxacan 2017 earthquake exemplified how global and political elites can seize on natural disasters to achieve policy goals. In this case, the shock of this natural event was compounded by institutional neglect. Meanwhile, state-supported policies of nearly immediate home demolition offered a way for government agencies to “rebuild” the area with small, homogenous houses that undermined the region’s collective identity (as represented by its “vernacular architecture” that had much symbolic meaning for residents). This disaster compelled elites (in their rush to invest in the “four cheap”), and community-based organizations aiming to “defend their territory” to innovate their frames and strategies. Judging from the aftermath of the earthquake which I observed through December of 2017, and from secondary reports that I analyzed through the spring of 2018, the “movement for life” in the Istmo was not defeated by the hardships that the natural disaster imposed on local communities, nor by the government policies that ensued. Organizations sought outside alliances with NGOs and recruited local professionals (e.g. architects and engineers) among their ranks to continue making
political claims while simultaneously offering disaster relief to the families that comprise their base of support.

This speaks to how disasters are, to some extent, not only objective events, but socially constructed processes. Disasters become part of threat-based contention by posing “suddenly-imposed grievances” (Walsh 1981) which social movements can seize upon if they possess the requisite cultural, organizational, and discursive resources. I also used the post-earthquake political situation to emphasize that dispossession can take cultural as well as material forms. Strategies to resist dispossession can and must address symbolic cultural identities and collective memory, as well as survival needs such as food, clothes, water and shelter.

I gained these insights by conducting sociological fieldwork in the region beginning three weeks after the earthquake. Respondents shared stories of how they dealt with the September 2017 earthquake’s destruction, and how the subsequent neglect of their material needs gave them the opportunity to revive the kind of social cohesion they had been trying to build previously. Virtually all respondents told me how construction companies were quick to demolish traditional homes. Meanwhile, schools remained out of session for months, and many municipalities were not even visited by government agencies while their homes lay in ruins. For my respondents, instead of dampening their resolve to oppose the SEZ, living through the earthquake’s dislocation seemed to intensify their fears that megaprojects would harm the region’s own food security and strain its public health. This finding cannot be analytically separated from the years of grassroots political organizing. Prior to the earthquake, as well as directly after it, SMOs
had been voicing these frames. Movements like APOYO had been modeling forms of social solidarity that they counterposed to the individualist promises that are being offered by neoliberal globalization, just as the COCEI of the 1980s had constructed an insurgent Zapotec identity hostile to the landowning and capitalist elite that was represented by the PRI party.

Since there are reasons to believe that the Isthmus SEZ would increase the kind of social vulnerability that marginalized communities dealt with during this recent disaster, the earthquake was a watershed moment in this region’s ongoing history of struggle against the neoliberal model. Former Mexican President (2012-2018) Enrique Peña Nieto’s structural reforms accelerated the privatization of energy and education throughout Mexico, with particular focus on Oaxaca as Mexico’s largest source of wind energy and on undermining its militant teacher’s union. SEZs exist to promote private investment in Southern Mexico. As such, they mandate zero value-added taxes for corporations operating within them. Local laws are re-tooled to subsidize corporations’ access to public services such as roads, infrastructure and even security forces (Comité Ixtepecano/Espacio de Mujeres 2016). In this way, the “extractivist” form of development (Acosta 2013, Veltmeyer and Petras 2014, Svampa 2015) sacrifices local fiscal resources to generate profits that mostly end up being externalized to foreign destinations. While underregulated industries such as oil, gas, mining and electric power can proceed to accumulate capital with even fewer fetters, no provisions protecting the rights of local populations are mandated by the legal framework of the Federal Law for Special Economic Zones which Mexico’s federal government passed in 2016 (Harrup
2016). The precarity that the earthquake imposed on the region, the channels of corruption and neglect that it exposed, and the environmental questions that it raised among the population and among the social movement community became a vigorous part of the dispute over the Special Economic Zone and the legitimacy of the government since Fall of 2017.

Indigenous activist groups have publicized a coherent critique of how the expansion of megaprojects will render their communities less safe, more divided, and culturally fragmented. Just as mining concessions have been framed by environmentalist, agrarian and human rights groups as hazardous to communal health and inimical to cultural identities, these same organizations sought to link their experiences of post-earthquake neglect, dispossession, and pacification to their larger fight for territorial justice and respect for ancestral cultures. This creative strategy served to reinforce support for the campaign against megaprojects that many indigenous, environmental, campesino, and women’s organizations in the Isthmus had been building in prior years. By reviving the practice of tequio in terms of Guendaliza’a (a Zapotec term denoting one’s obligations to their community), grassroots organizations modeled the social solidarity that can enable their further resilience against el despajo (dispossession). The way that social movements respond to and frame natural disasters is thus influenced by the local class, ethnic and political struggle between contending social groups, as well as by their interpretation of pre-existing cultural constructs that lend meaning to life.
AFTERWORD

Looking to the future: “El Istmo es Nuestro”

Since the completion of my fieldwork in December 2017, important developments have introduced new twists into the story that will have to be analyzed in future research. As I see it, these include some symbolic victories of the anti-mining movement, a new presidential administration, the beginning of a “fast-track” consultation process designed to accelerate development projects in the Isthmus, and a revision of the SEZ policy framework at the national level.

The municipality of Zanatepec has deepened and formalized its anti-mining stance. The mega-march I participated in 2016 was already a sign that agrarian organizations and civil society rejected all mining projects in the region. Then, in December of 2018, Zanatepec’s local government (both its outgoing and its elected municipal president) joined with communal lands commission and associations of ejidos to pass a legal act (acto de cabildo) declaring Zanatepec territorio libre de mineria, which means a territory free of mines. The Grupo Ecologista was a part of this coalition which demanded that the newly elected Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (“AMLO”), on his first month in office, “carry out consultations with indigenous peoples based on international conventions and treaties” (Manzo 2018b). The other actors who had pushed for the anti-mining resolution were the Union of Ejidos (led by my respondent Roberto Gamboa) and an NGO called Procesos Integrales para la Autogesation de los Pueblos, A.C. in which Gamboa has also been involved.
After a very tense standoff that gripped Mexico, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (“AMLO”) lost the 2006 presidential election as the candidate of the center-left PRD (Party of the Democratic Revolution). In that election, AMLO took 31.59 percent of the vote. In 2018, under his MORENA party (National Regeneration Movement), AMLO won in a landslide with 53 percent of the vote. MORENA also won control of Congress on September 1, 2018. While not positing a fundamental break with the structures of global capitalist or with Mexico’s dependence on the United States, he has proposed a center-left program including increased social spending, fighting corruption, and universal access to public colleges. There are far too many details and debates about AMLO and his positions to address here. Those that lie within the scope of this dissertation, however, revolve around his positions on megaprojects in Mexico’s South, and in how local consent is being sought. These include the Trans-Isthmus Corridor and other projects associated with the Special Economic Zone in the Tehuantepec Isthmus, as well as his several billion dollar “Mayan Train” project.

Through a referendum for which about 850,000 of Mexicans voted, AMLO plans to build 932 miles of train track through the five tropical states in Mexico’s southeast. Groups like the National Indigenous Network have threatened legal action, the Zapatistas (EZLN) vow resistance, and Mayan communities in the Yucatan peninsula have spoken out against it (Lichtinger and Aridjis 2018).

There is a common thread between the way AMLO has responded to criticism from environmental groups of the Mayan Train project, and the rhetoric used by former presidential administrations to justify Mexico’s Special Economic Zones. It is the same
framing used in North America by pro-extractive politicians and construction contractors to sell the Keystone XL Tar Sands and Dakota Access Pipelines (among many others) as good for growth ("lots of jobs," in the words of Donald Trump). The Tren Maya is also linked to the Special Economic Zones in Oaxaca and Chiapas because it offers a way for trade to bypass the Panama Canal, and instead to move through Southern Mexico to cross between the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. Despite the talk about eradicating the endemic poverty in Mexico’s Southeastern states, the rushed train project appears to be much more in line with international business interests than supporting local economies, health infrastructure, and sustainable employment.

In this context, the discussion of indigenous consultation (la consulta) will be a dicey issue for communities impacted by these planned mines and existing megaprojects. Declaring one’s community a pueblo libre de mineria mirrors the growing number of “community referenda” in Latin America. These local acts are intended to “contest the authority of the state to grant mining licenses or otherwise promote large-scale development projects in rural areas” (Kirsch 2014: 211). Consultations of this kind are modeled off of the United Nations International Labor Organization’s (ILO) Convention 169, which Mexico signed in 1990. Convention 169 resulted from years of indigenous struggle for recognition, and stipulates that tribal or indigenous people must give free, prior and informed consent (“FPIC”) before any government or corporations initiate a development project in their territory. The consultas in Latin America against mining projects began in 2005 in Guatemala. In South America, they have sometimes influenced
national electoral outcomes and delayed the international funding or approval for multibillion mining projects (Kirsch 2014: 220).

In the Tehuantepec Isthmus, such “consultations” have a checkered history at best. After the uprisings in and around Juchitán against wind energy projects, the wind energy company Eólica del Sur carried out an eight-month so-called consultation process. During this period, community members such as farmers, fishermen, and social movement groups similar to those studied in this dissertation heard presentations by representatives of Mexico’s state energy sector and the international wind energy industry. Based on six months of fieldwork during those meetings, Dunlap (2018b) compellingly details how the FPIC process in Juchitán was manipulated by the government and the companies. Activists charged that the FPIC was used as “a bureaucratic trap” to conduct a soft counter-insurgency against the population while effectively marketing the wind energy project. The process was devoid of meaningful dialogue, democratic decision making, and adequate social and environmental impact reports.

Similarly, on March 30 and March 31 of 2019, the federal government conducted a “fast-track” consultation of eight communities in the Isthmus regarding the Isthmus Special Economic Zone and its associated projects. This was done by the Secretaría de Hacienda and the Instituto Nacional de los Pueblos Indígenas (the Ministry of Finance and the National Institute of Indigenous People). Based on personal communication, posts on social media, and in NGO communiques, movement activists I have been in touch with in Zanatepec, Union Hidalgo, and Ixhuatán have denounced these measures as
the government’s way to simulate a consultation and secure a coerced “consent.” Their protests have continued under the banner “El Istmo es Nuestro” (The Isthmus is Ours).

As of April 2019, AMLO’s national government announced that the seven Special Economic Zones decreed by the previous administration will be cancelled. This however does not mean that neoliberalism is dead and megaprojects are retreating. In place of the SEZs, the government is now floating the idea of a “free zone” (zone libre) with seven “industrial parks” in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (González 2019a). By the end of AMLO’s six-year term, the goal seems to be modernization of ports and railroads, and to attract corporations with financial incentives. The new government has begun some talk of raising the tax burden on investors slightly higher than what was proposed under Peña Nieto’s SEZs. There is now a frank acknowledgement that the World Bank and the Interamerican Development Bank had advised Mexico that “it was not recommendable to open seven Special Economic Zones at once in the whole country” (González 2019a). If this is true, it could be a sign of the World Bank’s pragmatism, owing to a combination of legal pressure from NGOs, determined resistance by community groups and smallholders in this region, and the fact that the infrastructure plans were too politically complex to implement. This has been the case with previous development projects in the Isthmus that elites failed to complete (Talcott 2007).

At the same time, there are reports that AMLO is exploring whether to retain only the Trans-Isthmus Corridor between Salina Cruz, Oaxaca and Coatzacoalcos, Veracruz while ditching the other SEZs. This against suggests the strategic and geographic importance of the Isthmus to the Mexican political economy and to global accumulation
in this era. Regardless of this, even the new “free zones” project will apparently rely upon tapping “all of the raw materials in the area,” according to Rafael Marín Mollinedo, a federal administrator of the Special Economic Zones. The SEZs appear to be in the process of being strategically scaled back and (once again) re-named (González 2019). Future political economy research would be needed to better understand whether this move is in fact a victory for social movements, or whether it stems from the changing political and economic ties between the U.S., Mexico and Asia—including their maritime commerce linkages.

Leaders in the socio-environmental mobilization took a radical stance about “consultations” when I first met them. Manuel Antonio Ruiz of the Prepa José Martí in Ixhuatán, while once talking to me from his hammock in his house, smiled and calmly said that he is against consultations. Quite simply, he knew that consultations were a yet another pseudo-consent process for the companies to gain access to territory as detailed by Dunlap (2018b). So instead of clamoring for the “right to be consulted,” Manuel says “We don’t want to be consulted because we are totally against the mining projects, period.” Isthmus activist organizations mentioned in this dissertation such as APOYO and APIIDTT seem to maintain that same stance now. However, it is unclear whether they will continue to gain a following large enough to neutralize any pro-growth factions of the region (including workers or ejidos) who may have been taken in by AMLO’s popularity and the fact that his image/rhetoric differ from that of the PRI.

Will the resistance that I have analyzed in this dissertation stop these projects, even if they are now promulgated in some modified form by Mexico’s most left-leaning
president in decades? Will AMLO respect the mining exploration permits that transnational companies have signed under previous governments, or can his administration be prevailed upon to cancel them? Will more mining-free communities be decreed by self-determined actions at the municipal level? If so, will paramilitary groups deploy force and violence against anti-mine leaders, as has happened in Oaxaca (Morosin 2010, Vélez Ascencio 2013, Marias 2016), Chiapas (North and Young 2013), and many other parts of Latin America (Paley 2014, 2015)?

If the Isthmus region continues to become penetrated by capital and natural resource extraction, how will this affect its gender structure? How will Zapotec women’s relatively high social status be affected if more men move away from fishing and agriculture, and into formal industrial sector employment? How might traditions like Guendaliza’a become renewed, wane, or continue to evolve under these pressures from globalization? Will radical women’s roles in the defense of territory unleash more struggle against the multiple forms of violence that women already endure in this region?

Additional research is needed to investigate how activist campaigns in these mostly semi-rural areas maintain or ally with struggles against dispossession in Mexico’s urban cities, under the Mexico’s new President (AMLO). Most of Mexico’s population lives in urban areas, although many urban workers are actually seasonal or permanent migrants from rural areas like Oaxaca. I do not believe that environmental justice is only about natural resources in rural areas, that only “indigenous” movements can be anti-systemic, or that movements can win gains unless they inspire active support across broad sections of society. In this light, it is important to continue uncovering how (or
under what conditions) rural struggles about ethnic rights, place, territory, and natural resources are linked to urban struggles about issues such as energy, space, water, and labor. As dispossession continues to threaten social reproduction and degrade the environment in both rural and urban geographies, it will be necessary to evaluate how social movement strategies in the countryside and in cities collectively respond to the new policies and rhetoric that the MORENA party is carrying out in Congress and from the Office of the President. This could be compared to how social movements have resisted or accommodated center-left or populist regimes in Latin America over the past decade.

Finally, and in conclusion: I believe this dissertation further shows that in a world of so much unnecessary and life-threatening exploitation, paths must be forged in the 21st century that move toward revolutionary social, political and cultural change, not just in one region or nation-state but across the globe, for the survival of the human species and our planet. These urgent political struggles will continuously intersect with theoretical problems and empirical questions that remain to be answered along the way. In spite of our quite different life histories and our varying points of view, I warmly thank all of the participants in this project who have taught me, and continue to show the world, so much about what it means to defend life while confronting dispossession. Siempre adelante!
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APPENDIX I: Maps

Source: tomzap.com

Figure 1. The Mexican state of Oaxaca

Source: tomzap.com

Figure 2. The Isthmus of Tehuantepec is the narrow 140 mile (215 kilometer) strip of land between the Gulf of Tehuantepec in the Pacific Ocean and the Bay of Campeche in the Gulf of Mexico. My research was concentrated in the Southern (Oaxacan) side of the Isthmus.
Figure 3. Oaxaca’s eight regions

Figure 4. Districts in the state of Oaxaca. The Isthmus region is divided into two districts, which together contain 41 municipalities.
Figure 5. Municipalities in the Istmo’s District of Juchitán. The bulk of interviews were conducted in Ciudad Ixtepec, Santo Domingo Zanatepec, and San Francisco Ixhuatán. Some fieldwork was also conducted in Union Hidalgo, San Miguel Chimalapa, San Francisco del Mar, San Dionisio del Mar, and Juchitán de Zaragoza. At the time of fieldwork, mining exploration projects were known to exist in Ixtepec, Zanatepec, and San Miguel Chimalapa.
Figure 6. Land zoned for mining projects near San Miguel Chimalapa (2 projects: copper and gold) and Santo Domingo Zanatepec/San Pedro Tapanatepec (3 projects: copper, gold and silver). Yellow boxes denote mining exploration by a total of 4 mining companies. Blue lines denote rivers, brown lines denote existing highways, and grey boxes denote urban areas.
**APPENDIX II: Acronyms and Terms**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>APIIDTT</td>
<td><em>Asamblea de los Pueblos Indígenas del Istmo de Tehuantepec en Defensa de la Tierra y el Territorio</em> (Assembly of Indigenous People in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in Defense of Land and Territory)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APOYO</td>
<td><em>Articulación de Pueblos Originarios Del Istmo En Defensa Del Territorio</em>, Articulation of Original Peoples of the Isthmus in Defense of Territory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPJ</td>
<td><em>Asamblea Popular del Pueblo Juchiteco</em>, Popular Assembly of the Juchitecan People</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPO</td>
<td><em>Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca</em>, Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BANSEFI</td>
<td><em>Banco del Ahorro Nacional y Servicios Financieros, S.N.C.</em>, Bank of National Savings and Financial Services, National Credit Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CECACI</td>
<td><em>Centro Campesino de Asesoría y Capacitación Integral</em>, Campesino Center for Integral Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CENAPRED</td>
<td><em>Centro Nacional de Prevención de Desastres</em>, National Center for Disaster Prevention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COCEI</td>
<td><em>Coalición Obrera, Campesina, Estudiantil del Istmo</em>, Coalition of Workers, Campesino and Students of the Isthmus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COPEVI</td>
<td><em>Centro Operacional de Vivienda y Poblamiento, A.C.</em>, Operational Center for Housing and Population, Civil Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EZLN</td>
<td><em>Ejército Zapatista de Liberación</em>, Zapatista Army of National Liberation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FMLN</td>
<td><em>Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional</em>, Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (El Salvador)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FONDEN</td>
<td><em>Fondo Nacional para el Desarrollo Nacional</em>, National Fund for Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FUP</td>
<td><em>Frente de Unidad Popular</em>, Popular Unity Front</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acronym</td>
<td>Full Name</td>
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<tr>
<td>GEZ</td>
<td>Grupo Ecologista Zanatepec, Zanatepec Ecologist Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INMECAFE</td>
<td>Instituto Mexicano Del Café, Mexican Coffee Institute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MORENA</td>
<td>Movimiento Regeneración Nacional, National Regeneration Movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-governmental organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAN</td>
<td>Partido Acción Nacional, National Action Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRD</td>
<td>Partido de la Revolución Democrática, Party of the Democratic Revolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRI</td>
<td>Partido Revolucionario Institucional, Institutional Revolutionary Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROFEPA</td>
<td>Procuraduría Federal de Protección al Ambiente, Federal Environmental Protection Agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REMA</td>
<td>Red Mexicana de Afectados por la Minería, Network of Mexicans Affected By Mining</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEDATU</td>
<td>Secretaría Desarrollo Agrario, Territorial y Urbano, Mexican Office for Agrarian, Land and Urban Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEZ</td>
<td>Special Economic Zone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMO</td>
<td>Social Movement Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UCIRI</td>
<td>Unión de Comunidades Indígenas de la Región del Istmo, Union of Indigenous Communities of the Isthmus Region</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UMAFOR</td>
<td>Unidad de Manejo Forestal, Forest Management Unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNAM</td>
<td>Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, National Autonomous University of Mexico</td>
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APPENDIX III: Sample interview guides

1. Interview Guide for Activists (English translation)

While all respondents were asked basic questions pertaining to personal background and personal involvement, this interview guide is divided into sub-areas that were designed to elicit unique information from respondents based on personal attributes such as: whether they live close to a mine; involvement in other activism; roles in the social movement community; and race/class/gender. Most interviews loosely followed this guide, depending on which themes I wanted to explore with a particular respondent and which spontaneous themes we pursued during the course of the interview. Interviews were only conducted with persons 18 year of age or older.

A. Personal background information

1) Year born?
2) Organization you work with?
3) Town you live in?
4) Occupation?
5) Ethnic background (Mestizo, Zapotec, Mixtec, etc)
6) Gender
7) How much time spent with the organization?
8) Role in the organization? (leadership, mid-level leader, base supporter?
   Frequency of meetings and time spent per week? This was also discerned throughout the interview, based on what kind of qualitative involvement the respondent claims to have had)

B. Micro-mobilization: Recruitment of Activists, Consciousness

[Life history]

1) I am interested in why people are motivated to participate in the movement against the mines. What was it like to grow up here in Oaxaca? Can you share some struggles you had or hardships you saw people go through? Did you have experiences that made you aware of injustice? How did you come to see that things were wrong and that you could do something about it?

[Recruitment]

2) How did you first become convinced of the harm of the mines or other megaprojects?

3) How did you encounter this organization and this movement and how did you decide to participate?

[Subjective meanings of participation]
4) How has your decision to participate changed your life? How do you feel since you’ve started participating?

5) How do you feel when you are fighting for the goals of your organization? Does this empower you? Are you afraid for your safety?

6) What kind of community would you like to see as a result of your efforts?

C. Strategies and activities of the organization (RQ 2)

*7) What are the goals of the organization?

*8) How long has the organization been active in Oaxaca?

*9) Are there separate chapters (or allied groups) in Oaxaca, in other states, in other countries? If so, how do they come together and how do they plan actions?

*Most relevant for organizational leaders and founders

10) Which kinds of people would you like to see join this organization? Why should they get involved?

11) How does the group pursue its goals? What has been your strategy to make the government listen to your demands?

12) I’d like to discuss some of the actions of the group.
   - Can we talk your first action with the group?
   - What about the most significant action, from your point of view?
   - What is the most recent action you’ve participated in? Describe how these actions came together, what joining them felt like, what resulted, and what impact it had on you.

[If the respondent is active in a town adjacent to a mine]

13) Do you remember how the mine arrived and when? Who owns it, operates it, which agency gave it permission, which mineral(s) are they aiming to extract, etc.?

14) What do you see as the impact of the mine on the personal relations between people in the community? How many supported the project? Did people become divided from one another? Are they still divided? Etc.

15) Have there been any benefits of the mine to the community, or to individuals in the community?

16) Do you believe the community was legally consulted and informed about the project? Explain your thoughts about this.
17) Have you experienced or observed any new health problems since the mine began operating?

18) What has the organization been doing about the mine and what are its next steps?

[If the respondent is trying to prevent a mine from opening]

19) When did you first become aware of the mine trying to open? How? Who owns it, operates it, which agency gave it permission, what are they extracting, etc.

20) How did you perceive this news when you first became aware of the mine trying to enter? How do you view this issue today?

21) When and how did the organization become involved in this community?

22) What are you demanding, who are you making these demands to, and what are the next steps in the strategy? (continue asking about specific positions they’ve taken in their documents, why they choose certain slogans, etc., based on their organization’s literature or web presence).

23) What are the basic daily tasks of maintaining this organization, who does them, and how do you agree to share them?

[Gender questions]

24) What impact does mining have on women, children and families?

25) I understand that many women have become leaders against mining and other megaproyectos, and many of the supporters of these movements are women. Is this true in your experience? If so, why do you think this is? What role do women have in your organization as fighters and leaders? What role should women in Oaxaca play in this, and why?

[Ethnicity questions]

26) Some people tell me that mining companies are not respecting indigenous rights and customs (usos y costumbres). What do you see as the relationship between mining companies and the rights of indigenous people?

27) Are many indigenous people active in your organization? Do you think indigenous people are very informed and active on the issue of mining? Why/Why not?

[Class questions]

28) How does mining affect the livelihoods of campesinos?

29) Who supports mining and what benefits do you think they receive out of it?

[Place-based questions]
30) How would you describe the political culture of this region? Do people participate in politics? Are they happy with the government’s decisions? Why/Why not?

31) What is life like for (members of specific indigenous groups/ women/ campesinos) in this area?

32) Is there any other history of activism in this region that you see as important or influential?

33) What happened in this region during the APPO uprising of 2006? Were people affected? What was the response of the government in this area? Did you, family or friends participate? Now ten years later, do you see the 2006 movement as successful or helpful?

34) How do people in this area become informed about mining?

35) How would you characterize the security situation in this area? Are people afraid of violence? Has it gotten better or worse over the past 5 years?

36) Do you know of any violence or threats associated with the mine, either by opponents or supporters? (how do they feel about this, who do they see as responsible, do they think it will improve or worsen, etc)

[“other activism” questions]

37) Have you been involved in other social movements besides this one?

A. Since when?

B. Belong to other org’s? Which? Why?

C. Describe with who and what kind of issues.

D. What form of activism (protesting, speaking at meetings, sit-ins, etc)

E. Have these other struggles been successful?

F. Do people in different movements work on the mining issue as well?

G. Is it dangerous to be an activist in this area? Why/ why not?

[Wrapping up]

38) Before we conclude this interview, are there other participants or knowledgeable people you think I should speak with? May I contact them, or would you introduce me?

39) During this interview, were there any questions that bothered you?

40) Is there anything else you would like the people reading this to know?
2. Interview Guide for Activists (English translation)

Guía de Entrevista Para Activistas

En el inicio de la entrevista, todos los entrevistados recibirán preguntas básicas sobre sus antecedentes personales y su involucramiento personal en los movimientos. Además, esta guía de entrevista se divide en subáreas que están diseñados para obtener información como: si viven cerca de una mina; participación en otra activismo; posición de liderazgo en el movimiento contra las minas; y la raza / clase / género del entrevistado. Estas entrevistas son solamente para personas adultas 18 años de edad o mas, y no para menores de edad.

A. Información Personal
1) En que año nació?
2) Con cual organización trabajas?
3) Donde vives?
4) Su ocupación?
5) Indígena?
6) Genero?
7) Cuanto tiempo llevas con tu organización?
8) Que papel tienes en la organización? (algún trabajo específico, etc)
B. Movilización de Activistas y Cuestiones de Consciencia

[Historia personal]

1) Estoy interesado en saber por qué la gente está motivada para participar en el movimiento contra las minas. ¿Cómo fue crecer aquí en Oaxaca? ¿Puede compartir algunas luchas que tuvo o que observó? ¿Ha tenido experiencias que le hizo consciente de la injusticia? ¿Cómo llegó a pensar que las cosas estaban mal y que se podía hacer algo al respecto?

[Reclutamiento]

2) ¿Cómo se convenció del daño de las minas?
3) ¿Cómo se unió con esta organización y este movimiento y cómo decidió de participar?
[significados subjetivos de participación]
4) ¿En que manera ha cambiado su su vida después de empezar a participar? ¿Cómo se siente desde que ha comenzado su participación?
5) ¿Cómo se siente mientras está luchando por los objetivos de su organización?
6) ¿Que significaría ganar esta batalla para usted? ¿Qué tipo de comunidad y qué tipo de Oaxaca le gustaría ser el resultado de sus esfuerzos?

C. Estrategias y Actividades de la Organización

7) Cuales son las metas de la organización?
8) Para cuanto tiempo ha sido activa en Oaxaca esta organización?
9) ¿Hay capítulos separados (o grupos afines) en Oaxaca, en otros estados, en otros países? Si es así, ¿cómo se juntan y cómo se planifican las acciones?

10) ¿Qué tipo de gente le gustaría ver a unirse a esta organización? ¿Por qué deberían involucrarse?

11) ¿Cómo funciona sigue sus objetivos? ¿Cuál ha sido su estrategia para hacer que el gobierno escuche sus demandas?

12) Me gustaría hablar de algunas de las acciones del grupo.
• ¿Podemos hablar de su primera acción con el grupo?
• ¿Qué pasó con la acción más significativa, desde su punto de vista?
• ¿Cuál es la acción más reciente en que ha participado? Describe cómo estas acciones se juntan, como se sintió unirse a ellos, lo que se dio como resultado, y qué impacto personal tuvo en usted.

[si la persona vive acerca de una mina]
13) ¿Recuerda cómo llegó la mina y cuando? Quien lo posee, opera, cual instancia le dio permiso, ¿qué están extrayendo, etc.? ¿Quienes son los mineros, y cuáles son sus relaciones con ellos?

14) ¿Qué ves como el impacto de la mina en las relaciones personales entre personas de la comunidad? Cuantos apoyaron el proyecto? ¿La gente se divida el uno del otro? Están todavía divididos?

15) ¿Ha habido beneficios de la mina a la comunidad, o para individuos en la comunidad?

16) ¿Cree que la comunidad fue informada y consultada legalmente sobre el proyecto? Explica sus pensamientos acerca de esto.

17) ¿Ha tenido u observado algún problema nuevo de salud desde que la mina comenzó a operar?

18) Cuáles son los próximos pasos de la organización respecto a la mina? [Si la persona está tratando de evitar la apertura de una mina]

19) ¿Recuerda cómo llegó la mina y cuando? Quien lo posee, opera, cual instancia le dio permiso, ¿qué están extrayendo, etc.? ¿Quienes son los mineros, y cuáles son sus relaciones con ellos?

20) ¿La primera vez que tuvo conocimiento de la mina intentando a entrar, cómo ha percibido esta noticia? ¿Qué opina de esto hoy?

21) ¿Cuándo y cómo se empezó a involucrar la organización en esta comunidad?

22) ¿Qué estan exigiendo, que están haciendo para lograr estas demandas, y cuáles son los próximos pasos en la estrategia?

23) ¿Cuáles son las tareas diarias básicas de mantenimiento de esta organización, quien las hace, y cómo se acuerdan compartirlos? [cuestiones de genero]

24) ¿Qué impacto tiene la minería sobre las mujeres, los niños y las familias?

25) Entiendo que muchas mujeres se han convertido en líderes en contra de la minería y otros megaproyectos, y muchos de los seguidores de estos movimientos son mujeres. ¿Es esto cierto en su experiencia? Si es así, ¿por qué crees que es esto? ¿Qué papel tienen las mujeres en su organización como combatientes y líderes? ¿Qué papel deben desempeñar las mujeres en Oaxaca en esto, y por qué?
[cuestiones de etnicidad]

26) Algunas personas me dicen que las compañías mineras no están respetando los derechos y costumbres indígenas (usos y costumbres). ¿Según usted, cual es la relación entre las empresas mineras y los derechos de los indígenas?

27) Cuantas personas indígenas cree que hay activas en su organización? ¿Cree que los y las indígenas son muy informada y activas en el tema de la minería en Mexico?

[cuestiones de clase]

28) Como son afectados los campesinos por la minería?

29) Quienes apoyan a la minería y qué beneficios cree que reciben de ella?

[cuestiones relacionadas con lugar geográfico]

30) ¿Cómo describiría la cultura política de esta región? ¿Las personas participan en la política? ¿Están contentos con las decisiones del gobierno?

31) Como es la vida para (indígenas/ mujeres/ campesinos) en esta región?

32) ¿Hay alguna otra historia de activismo en esta región (además del movimiento antiminería) que Ud. ve como importante o influyente?

33) Que ocurrió en esta región durante el levantamiento de 2006? Fueron las personas afectadas? ¿Cuál fue la respuesta del gobierno en esta área? ¿Usted, su familia o amigos participaron? Ahora, diez años después, ¿cree que el movimiento de 2006 fue exitoso o útil en mejorar la vida de campesinos y indígenas?

34) Como se informa la gente en esta zona acerca la minería y que piensa que opina la gente aquí acerca la minería?

35) ¿Cómo caracterizaría la situación de seguridad en esta área? ¿La gente tiene miedo de la violencia? Cree que las cosas se mejoraron en los últimos 5 años, o no?

36) ¿Sabe usted de cualquier forma de violencia o amenazas asociados con la mina, ya sea por los oponentes o partidarios [supporters]? (how do they feel about this, who do they see as responsible, do they think it will improve or worsen, etc)

[preguntas sobre los antecedentes politicos de la persona]

37) Ud. Ha sido involucrado/involucrada en otros tipos de movimientos a parte este movimiento?

A. Desde cuando?
B. Pertenece a otra org? ¿Cual? ¿Por qué?
C. Describir con quién y qué clase de problemas.
D. ¿Qué forma de activismo (protestar, hablando en las reuniones, planteones, etc)
E. ¿Han sido exitosas estas otras luchas?
F. ¿La gente en diferentes movimientos trabajan en el tema de la minería tambien?
G. ¿Es peligroso ser un activista en esta área? ¿Por qué, por qué no?

[en resumen]

38) Antes de concluir, cree que hay otros participantes o personas con quien yo debería hablar?

39) Durante la entrevista, hubo alguna pregunta que le hizo sentir incomoda/incomodo?

40) Debería estar pidiendo más preguntas? ¿Hay algo más que quiera que sepa la gente que va a leer esta entrevista?
## APPENDIX IV: Table of Formal Interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME, LOCATION</th>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>DURATION</th>
<th>SOCIAL BACKGROUND</th>
<th>KEY THEMES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Fernando Ramos, Ixtlan (Sierra Norte)</td>
<td>October 2016</td>
<td>1.5 hours</td>
<td>Professor</td>
<td>Zapotec gender relations, defense of territory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Carlos, Juchitan</td>
<td>October 2016</td>
<td>1 hour 12 minutes</td>
<td>APPJ community radio activist</td>
<td>Anti-wind park movement, repression, indigenous environmentalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Bettina Cruz Velázquez, Juchitan</td>
<td>November 2016</td>
<td>1 hour 45 minutes</td>
<td>APPIDT human rights activist</td>
<td>Anti-wind park movement, gendered repression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Daniel Toledo, Zanatepec</td>
<td>October 2016</td>
<td>17 minutes</td>
<td>Ejido president</td>
<td>Role of ejidos in defense of territory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Felipe La Bastida, Zanatepec</td>
<td>October 2016</td>
<td>58 minutes</td>
<td>Shop owner. Zapotec, Chontal</td>
<td>Mining, indigenous environmentalism, life history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Gabi, Zanatepec</td>
<td>November 2016</td>
<td>54 minutes</td>
<td>Radio Guluchi, community radio</td>
<td>Mining, radio activism, gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Kiro, Ixhuatan</td>
<td>November 2016</td>
<td>1 hour 13 minutes</td>
<td>Prepa Jose Marti teacher, Masters student</td>
<td>Comunalidad, mining, community activism, culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Rafa, Zanatepec</td>
<td>November 2016</td>
<td>45 minutes</td>
<td>Radio Guluchi activist</td>
<td>Radio activism against mining</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Silvino, Ixhuatan</td>
<td>November 2016</td>
<td>1 hour 5 minutes</td>
<td>Prepa Jose Marti teacher, Radio Ixhuatan volunteer</td>
<td>Prepa activism, gender relations in Ixhuatan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No.</td>
<td>Interviewee</td>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Duration</td>
<td>Class, Occupation, and Motivations</td>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Familia Toledo Garcia (husband, wife, grandmother), Zanatepec</td>
<td>November 2016</td>
<td>1 hour 6 minutes</td>
<td>Middle class, active in local politics, Local activism, grandmother’s history in CECACI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Anonymous youth, Zanatepec</td>
<td>November 2016</td>
<td>1 hour 19 minutes</td>
<td>Independent hip hop artist, Youth anti-mining activism, music as activism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Daniel Cirilo, Zanatepec</td>
<td>December 2016</td>
<td>1 hour 26 minutes</td>
<td>Day laborer, Grupo Ecologista Zanatepec, Mining, indigenous environmentalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>Gerardo and Raymundo, Ixtepec</td>
<td>November 2016</td>
<td>40 minutes</td>
<td>Architect and engineer, Gerardo mestizo, Ixtepec’s Zapotec culture, neoliberalism, role of women in movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>Heriberto, Ixtepec</td>
<td>November 2016</td>
<td>1 hour 58 minutes</td>
<td>Campesino, COCEI-Ixtepec, Land relations, local politics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>Facunda, Zanatepec</td>
<td>November 2016</td>
<td>31 minutes</td>
<td>Housewife, Motivations for opposing mine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>Anonymous family (husband and wife), Zanatepec</td>
<td>November 2016</td>
<td>19 minutes</td>
<td>Campesino, working class, Motivations for opposing mine, impressions from mega-march</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>Maria, Zanatepec</td>
<td>November 2016</td>
<td>39 minutes</td>
<td>Housewife, Motivations for opposing mine, impressions from mega-march</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.</td>
<td>Servando, Ixtepec</td>
<td>December 2016</td>
<td>50 minutes</td>
<td>President of Ranchers’ Association, Ixtepec (Presidente de Asociacion Ganadera), Agrarian issues, neoliberalism, indigenous movement in Mexico</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td>Raul, San Miguel Chimalapa</td>
<td>December 2016</td>
<td>1 hour 30 minutes</td>
<td>Grade school teacher. Zoque, History of organizing in Chimalapas, local anti-mining work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.</td>
<td>Nashieli, Ixtepec</td>
<td>December 2016</td>
<td>2 hours 10 minutes</td>
<td>Feminist activist (multiple organizations), Istmo activism, gender relations, matriarchy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No.</td>
<td>Name and Location</td>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Duration</td>
<td>Role and Activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>22.</td>
<td>Manuel, Ixhuatan</td>
<td>December 2016</td>
<td>1 hour 57 minutes</td>
<td>Coordinator, Preparatoria Jose Marti, Ixhuatan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23.</td>
<td>Familia Ramírez Guzmán (mother, father, son, daughter), Ixtepec</td>
<td>December 2016</td>
<td>52 minutes</td>
<td>Ex-security guard for a mine in Guanajuato, housewife, university students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24.</td>
<td>Maestro Chico and his wife, San Miguel Chimalapa</td>
<td>January 2017</td>
<td>54 minutes</td>
<td>Teacher, anti-mine. Zoque</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.</td>
<td>Jose Luis Valdivieso Ortiz, Zanatepec</td>
<td>January 2017</td>
<td>1 hour 7 minutes</td>
<td>Science teacher, author, Grupo Ecologista Zanatepec</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.</td>
<td>Kiko, Zanatepec</td>
<td>January 2017</td>
<td>1 hour 7 minutes</td>
<td>Rural Development student (University of Puebla)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.</td>
<td>Eutiquio, Zanatepec</td>
<td>January 2017</td>
<td>1 hour 15 minutes</td>
<td>Zoque. Grupo Ecologista Zanatepec.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.</td>
<td>Eliazar, Zanatepec</td>
<td>January 2017</td>
<td>1 hour 9 minutes</td>
<td>Mixteco. Community organizing in Zanatepec. Lived history of labor exploitation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29.</td>
<td>Josefa, San Miguel Chimalapa</td>
<td>February 2017</td>
<td>2 hours 15 minutes</td>
<td>Feminist activist (multiple organizations) Zoque</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30.</td>
<td>Dona Fina, San Miguel Chimalapa</td>
<td>February 2017</td>
<td>39 minutes</td>
<td>Elderly housewife Zoque</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31.</td>
<td>Angela, San Miguel Chimalapa</td>
<td>February 2017</td>
<td>33 minutes</td>
<td>Elderly housewife Zoque</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No.</td>
<td>Name and Location</td>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Duration</td>
<td>Role and Organizations</td>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>32.</td>
<td>Azalia</td>
<td>February 2017</td>
<td>30 minutes</td>
<td>Zoque, Colectivo Matza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33.</td>
<td>Silvano, Zanatepec</td>
<td>December 2017</td>
<td>52 minutes</td>
<td>Ejido Rio Manzo, member. Campesino</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34.</td>
<td>Maria, Ixhuatan</td>
<td>February 2017</td>
<td>2 hours 2 minutes</td>
<td>Teacher, Preparatoria Jose Marti. Nahuatl.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35.</td>
<td>Juan Regalado and Guadalupe Ramirez Castellanos, Union Hidalgo</td>
<td>February 2017</td>
<td>1 hour 59 minutes</td>
<td>Gas station manager, engineer, human rights activists (multiple organizations).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37.</td>
<td>Isabel (Ixtepec)</td>
<td>February 2017</td>
<td>1 hour 11 minutes</td>
<td>Teacher, Liberation theologist.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38.</td>
<td>Roberto Gamboa, Zanatepec</td>
<td>February 2017</td>
<td>2 hours 13 minutes</td>
<td>President of Union of Ejidos, Zanatepec. Mestizo. Human rights activist (REMA, et al.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39.</td>
<td>Ex-Municipal President, Santiago Yosondua (Mixteca)</td>
<td>February 2017</td>
<td>1 hour 8 minutes</td>
<td>Mixteco.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40.</td>
<td>Licensiado, Santiago Yosondua (Mixteca)</td>
<td>February 2017</td>
<td>50 minutes</td>
<td>Former member of national government, Mixteco.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ID</td>
<td>Name, Location</td>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Duration</td>
<td>Occupation(s) / Identity Issue(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>Angeles, Zanatepec</td>
<td>March 2017</td>
<td>2 hours 12 minutes</td>
<td>Working class, artist. Grupo Ecologista Zanatepec. Life history, gender, matriarchy, culture, anti-mining</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>Miguel, Mexico City</td>
<td>March 2017</td>
<td>27 minutes</td>
<td>Human rights worker (REMA). Ethnicity unknown. Anti-mining strategy, case of Zanatepec</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>Jorge Varrajas, Ixtepec</td>
<td>November 2017</td>
<td>43 minutes</td>
<td>Shopkeeper, economist. Guendaliza’a, earthquake, mining, neoliberalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44</td>
<td>Elida Rosado Santiago and Jose Sergio Toledo Herrera, Ixtepec</td>
<td>November 2017</td>
<td>1 hour 6 minutes</td>
<td>Fashion designer, taxi driver. Working class. Earthquake, mining, tequio, Comite Ixtepecano</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45</td>
<td>Susana, Ixtepec</td>
<td>November 2017</td>
<td>1 hour 5 minutes</td>
<td>Tortilla vendor. Earthquake, mining, rebuilding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46</td>
<td>Katia and Marcelina, Ixtepec</td>
<td>November 2017</td>
<td>25 minutes</td>
<td>Local family. Experiencing the earthquake and neglect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47</td>
<td>Yolanda, Ixhuatan</td>
<td>November 2017</td>
<td>1 hour 29 minutes</td>
<td>Elementary school teacher. Experiencing the earthquake and neglect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48</td>
<td>Fernanda, Ixtepec</td>
<td>December 2017</td>
<td>1 hour 49 minutes</td>
<td>Geographer, feminist activist. Earthquake, reconstruction, gender, culture, feminism vs. matriarchy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49</td>
<td>Alfonso, Union Hidalgo</td>
<td>December 2017</td>
<td>50 minutes</td>
<td>Engineering student, community activist (Colectivo Bini Cubi). Wind parks, earthquake, reconstruction, Zapotec culture, ancestral roots</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>Anonymous Man, Union Hidalgo</td>
<td>December 2017</td>
<td>1 hour 44 minutes</td>
<td>Writer, community activist. Earthquake, reconstruction, comunalidad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Duration</td>
<td>Role and Affiliation</td>
</tr>
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<td>---------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>51. Araceli,</td>
<td>Juchitan</td>
<td>December 2017</td>
<td>1 hour 5 min</td>
<td>Psychology Masters student, domestic violence caseworker Ministry of Justice (Fiscalía de Justicia), Oaxaca City/ Juchitan. Mixteca</td>
</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>52. Alejandro,</td>
<td>Zanatepec (Second</td>
<td>December 2017</td>
<td>1 hour 30 min</td>
<td>Status of mining concessions, legal issues, agrarian structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>interview)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53. Daniel Cirilo,</td>
<td>Zanatepec (second</td>
<td>December 2017</td>
<td>30 minutes</td>
<td>His local activism and his concerns about the movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>interview)</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Respondents identify with Zapotec ethnicity and culture, unless otherwise noted.
Anonymous threat sent to anti-mine activist from Grupo Ecologista Zanatepec via text message, November 2016.

Translation: “Look S.O.B. you’d better stay the f--- away or you’re next. I know who the f--- you are and where you work.”
“No to the Mine in Ixtepec” Mural, November 2016
Mega-march against in mining in Zanatepec on Panamerican Highway, November 20, 2016
Mega-march against mining in Zanatepec, November 20, 2016. There was a separate anti-mine march led by Zanatepec’s municipal president that went underneath the Panamerican Highway overpass.

All photos by author.