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WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST. LOUIS

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Social Change and Documentary Film in Mexico:  
Violence, Autonomy, and Cultural Production

by

Livia Katherine Stone

A dissertation presented to the  
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences  
of Washington University in  
partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree  
of Doctor of Philosophy

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St. Louis, Missouri

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## **ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION**

Social Change and Documentary Film in Mexico: Violence, Autonomy, and Cultural Production

by

Livia Katherine Stone

Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology

Washington University in St. Louis, 2012

Professor Bret Gustafson, Chairperson

The use of Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and other social media in the Arab Spring, #Occupy Wall Street, and Mexico's #YoSoy132 student movement have all generated excitement about the new uses of digital technology in organized social movements. This dissertation concerns itself with media and social transformation, but recognizes that even as media content can have a deep impact on society and culture, it is ultimately human beings who create and use technology off screen for our own purposes. This dissertation focuses ethnographically on one social movement, the Frente de Pueblos en Defensa de la Tierra (The Peoples' Front in Defense of Land) of San Salvador Atenco on the outskirts of Mexico City, and their relationships with a range of national and international filmmakers. Through examining the daily practices of producing and distributing social documentary films, I show how people used media as an ethical and political practice to purposefully shape and transform face-to-face human relationships. I argue that filmmaking and distributing was one set of practices through which people attempted to cultivate a collectivist disposition called *compañerismo*, and through which they could build partial autonomies from the state and corporate capitalism. I argue that the

historical shift from ‘resistance’ political practices to ‘autonomy’ practices represents a significant departure for contemporary transnational social movements, and signifies a trend away from a Marxist tradition of organizing and toward greater articulation with anarchist thinking and organizing. The cultivation of *compañerismo* is part of this shift and is indicative of a partial relocation of objectives away from institutional, legal, and policy changes and toward personal and collective transformations of self. I argue that the intersection between cultural production and self production is a crucial locus for examining how social movements help to bring about elusive social and cultural changes that exist outside the grasp of legal and institutional frameworks. These arguments build from and contribute to three large bodies of anthropological research: a political anthropology interested in social movements, a visual anthropology interested in media production, and a broad theoretical anthropological interest in transformations of self, society, and culture through practice.



## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

In 2008 a mutual friend introduced me to Manuel,<sup>1</sup> a young man around thirty who sold used LPs, cassette tapes, and VHS cassettes to pedestrian traffic near a busy metro station in downtown Mexico City. In the park across the street were more than a dozen vendors selling handmade bags, indigenous-looking clothing, and leather goods. On the side of the street where Manuel was located, the vendors sold more commercially manufactured goods. Each stall was a metal frame with tarps stretched over the top to provide shelter, and a piece of plywood supported by crossbars on which the vendors placed their goods. The vendor on the busy corner sold pirated commercial DVDs. The man next to him sold plastic alarm clocks. Manuel's stall was at the other end of the block, wedged between the curb and a stall selling nothing but men's socks and ties.

A few weeks later, when I went back to chat with Manuel, I didn't see him at first because while the boxes of records and tapes that filled his stall stood high on the sidewalk, he sat several inches lower, on a stool in the street. He was wearing jeans and a t-shirt and his head had been shaved a few weeks previously, an uneven quarter inch or so of stubble growing back in. Manuel remembered me, but seemed quite reticent to talk at first, using cryptic and vague terms that would have been meaningless to anyone not in-the-know. He was friendly, but guarded, and usually answered my questions with a question of his own that tested who and how much I knew. I kept visiting his stall over the course of several weeks, stopping by to chat whenever I was close to his metro stop, and after several visits (and probably asking around about me) he opened up a little and told me about selling DVDs and his involvement with a social movement called La Otra Campaña.

On one occasion he explained to me why he chose to sell used LPs and tapes. Even though lots of people sell pirated and illegal materials, he told me, it is difficult because you have to pay the right people and the work is more dangerous. Mafias, he said, own the sidewalk and control who can set up stalls there. One has to pay them rent for setting up. He insinuated that those selling pirated goods are connected to large distribution networks connected to the mafias. By selling used media, he told me, he isn't breaking any laws, isn't challenging the mafias, and he isn't selling goods (like plastic alarm clocks or neckties) that are made with exploitative labor in China and Northern Mexico. "Besides," he added, "I like vinyl." In addition to his usual media, Manuel used to sell social documentaries (documentaries about political or social issues), which he justified because the ones he sold were not copyright protected. He wasn't selling stolen or illegal goods, but the police came by every day to harass him and "confiscated" the films until he was forced to stop carrying them. He could have put up with the harassment, he told me, but the other vendors on the block didn't appreciate the attention their area was receiving from the police and they threatened him, saying that if he didn't stop carrying the films they wouldn't let him set up on the block anymore. He stopped selling the documentaries.

When asked why he wanted to sell social documentaries at all, he told me that it was "cultural diffusion" work [*difusión cultural*] connected to social movements. He saw it as part of his activism. Selling films about the Frente de Pueblos en Defensa de la Tierra [The Front of Peoples/Towns in Defense of land, hereafter referred to as 'the Frente'] was one part of his political participation that included many different kinds of activities. He told me that he went to the barricades in Atenco (the home of the Frente) in May 2006 as part of his participation in La Otra Campaña [The Other Campaign, another social movement], and to protect the community from the police invasion in solidarity with the Frente. When thousands of police entered the

town in the early hours of the morning, he fought them. “We ran out of Molotov cocktails,” he said, “We ran out of rocks, we ran out of everything. We ended up just throwing bottles of coke at them.” When it became clear that they would not be able to hold off the police, he ran. Somehow he climbed a building and tried to run across roofs, but there were helicopters overhead looking for people. “I jumped,” he said, and then blushed, “Well, I fell really—into someone’s courtyard.” Some people, he explained to me, tried to take shelter with people who turned them in to the police. “I was lucky,” he said. The people in the house he fell into gave him a change of clothes and hid him. At this point in the narrative, his face became contorted and pained and his story trailed off.

As I will show, Manuel’s story reveals the multiple ways that social documentary film is incorporated into social movements in Mexico and throughout networks of transnational social movements. The Frente and La Otra Campaña are embedded in transnational networks that often identify themselves as ‘anti-capitalist’, although Jeff Juris (2008) argues that they are more accurately described as against what he calls “corporate capitalism,” a term that encapsulates a range of social, economic, and political forces including ‘free trade’ economic policies, the consolidation of manufacturing into large multinational corporations, the often exploitative labor practices of these corporations in the Global South, and a general reorganization that “generates complex spatial patterns as flows of capital, goods, and people have come unbound, even as they are reinscribed within concrete locals” (Juris 2008: 7). It is in this global political and economic context that there is increasing interest in the intersection between media (especially digital, visual, and social media) and organized social movements. As the reach of states, economies, and consumer cultures become transnational, so do social movements and networks of resistance and opposition. The use of Facebook in the Arab Spring, #Occupy Wall Street’s use of Twitter in

the U.S., and #YoSoy132's use of Twitter and YouTube in Mexico have all generated popular and scholarly excitement about the new uses of digital technology and social media in organized social movements.

The central question of this dissertation is how one contemporary social movement (that is part of a network of transnational, anti-corporate capitalist social movements) understood its use of documentary films as part of a set of political and organizational strategies and practices. I approach this question through the ethnographic study of the people and human relationships that are involved in the production, distribution, and consumption of documentary films. The content of films can have a transformative impact on viewers. This dissertation however, begins from the perspective that what happens off screen and outside of one's individual relationship with a text is at least as important, and often much more important, in attempting to understand the social, political, and cultural impacts of media. I begin from the perspective that people use media to facilitate, or "mediate" (Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod & Larkin 2002), face-to-face interactions and relationships with other people. This approach concentrates on the human relationships cultivated and transformed through the production and distribution process as well as the personal transformations that filmmakers attempt to bring about in themselves through their production and distribution practices. Manuel, for example, is not a member of the Frente and yet he went to Atenco in 2006 to help protect it in a spirit of solidarity, a spirit that I will discuss as an ethical disposition of *compañerismo*. After the repression, Manuel began to sell documentary films about Atenco in his stall in the same spirit of *compañerismo*. Selling documentaries was part of a political and ethical practice of transforming himself into someone who cares more for social justice than profit, and more for a collectivity of *compañeros* [partners or comrades] than for his individual ambition.

I argue that selling, gifting, and screening documentaries is part of an effort to collectively cultivate *compañerismo* and create alternative non-capitalist economies of production, reciprocity, and consumption. I argue that these alternative economies of practice (Buddle 2008) are part of a range of ‘autonomy practices’ that work to form partial autonomies from the state and corporate capitalism. Autonomy practices are important because they represent a significant contemporary shift in social movements throughout Latin America and the world away from traditions of Marxist and socialist organizing based on what I call “resistance practices” and toward a model that articulates much more closely with traditions of anarchism.

Some activists, like Manuel, identify as anarchists and frequent spaces in which anarchists gather, such as the (then active) anarchist library in Mexico City or El Chopo punk market. Others, like the middle-aged man who introduced me to Manuel, have spent their lives organizing in socialist and communist parties and have turned toward anarchist thinking slowly with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the ‘opening up’ of Cuba and China. Most people in this dissertation however, are only remotely interested in this kind of identification or ideology. Some would reject it vehemently. Most people in Atenco are simply interested in building a better life for themselves and their friends and families. I argue that the shift in organizing is occurring because of a convergence of political, economic, and cultural factors that make ‘resistance’ to the state seem less viable as a productive solution. Creating partial autonomies from corporate capitalism and the state (not just a particular state, but all states) can seem to be a much more achievable and desirable goal. Resistance practices and autonomy practices are complementary and concurrent, but the shift toward autonomy is palpable in Atenco and throughout transnational networks of activists.

I argue that media, broadly conceived as lines of public communication, are a primary site through which transnational movements are beginning to create partial autonomies from the state and corporate capitalism. Building on Juris's (2008) argument that activists in transnational movements are using electronic media as a model for organizing as well as a means of communication, I argue that producing and distributing media become political and ethical practices through which people come to transform themselves both as individuals and collectives. Media practice is not the only set of practices through which this transformation occurs. However, transformation of self is a crucial process through which we must understand media practice and the intersection between media and social movements. I argue that 'cultural production,' usually understood as the material production of arts, is also a process that produces social, cultural, economic, and political structures. I argue that these structures, networks, and pathways can be deeply transformative.

These arguments build from and contribute to three large bodies of anthropological research: a political anthropology interested in social movements, a visual anthropology interested in media production, and a broad theoretical anthropological interest in transformations of self, society, and culture through practice. I describe how this dissertation contributes to these bodies of knowledge below.

## **1.1 SOCIAL MOVEMENTS**

Scholars from a variety of disciplines described New Social Movements of the twentieth century as leaving behind the strictly class-based conception of peasant social movements (Melucci 1989, Taylor & Whittier 1992, Laraña et al 1994). These new movements articulated (Hall 1996) themselves around a variety of identities (tied to race, gender, sexuality, and

indigeneity) that operated across class lines. They sought to legitimize these identities as deserving of equal rights under the law. However, the legal gains won in New Social Movements were often unsatisfactory. Once indigenous/queer/black/female people were recognized as legitimate rights-bearing citizens by the state, it appeared as if the battle had been won, but discrimination, racism, sexism, and disenfranchisement lived on in social and cultural milieus (see, for example, Jackson 2008). Furthermore, once recognized by the state, the category could be institutionalized, reified, and regulated in constricting, rather than liberating, ways.

The articulation around identities also created tensions for people who identified with more than one of these marginalized groups. Black lesbians in the United States, for example, often felt conflicts between their participation in the Black Power movement, the Feminist movement, and the Lesbian movement of the 1960s and 1970s (see, for example, Combahee River Collective 1986 [1977]). These conflicts resulted in each of these movements marginalizing some members who identified with several movements. For example, women were marginalized in the Civil Rights movement, lesbians were marginalized in Feminist movements, and working class men were marginalized in Gay Rights movements.

Beginning in the 1980s and 1990s, feminist scholars began to place emphasis on what Crenshaw (1991) has termed “intersectionality,” or the multiple ways that class, race, gender, sexuality and other identifications come together in individuals to form multiple vectors of privilege and oppression between and among categories. Queer Theory posed further challenges to New Social Movement identities by arguing that these categories are unstable, transient, and performative (Butler 1993, Halberstam 1998, Warner 2001, Boellstorff 2007).

The challenges posed to identity-based social movements were not merely theoretical or academic exercises. A wide diversity of social movements in the late 1990s began to create solidarities and work together on contingent bases across national, ideological, and identity lines. These movements did not seek to win citizenship rights for marginalized groups, but to work against a range of economic, political, and social issues surrounding processes of globalization and corporate capitalism. Major points of articulation for these movements were the 1994 Zapatista uprising, the 1999 ‘Battle of Seattle’ World Trade Organization protests, the IndyMedia movement, and the open-code software movement (Galindo Cáceres 1997, Nash 2001, Halleck 2002, Kidd et al 2003, Coyer 2005, Juris 2008). Some movements began to organize large meetings dubbed the World Social Forum that paralleled the World Economic Forum meetings and that came to be a significant force generating new forms of social organizing throughout the world (Waterman & Sen 2007). A primary point of articulation for these movements in Mexico was La Otra Campaña, a next-generation zapatismo that sought to unify Mexico’s diverse social movements into one influential network that eschewed identity categories and party politics (Anonymous 2005, Hinegarder 2011).

This messy and diffuse network of social movements has led to (among other movements) the #Occupy movement across the United States (Juris 2012), the Camping movement in Spain (Castañeda 2012), and the #YoSoy132 movement that crystalized during the 2012 elections in Mexico. These movements purposefully rejected articulation around any unified identity or set of demands. Instead, they crystalized in part around media production and distribution. As Juris (2008) argues, communication for these movements became an end in itself, something that was constitutive of social organization, and provided both a model for, and a practice in, social transformation.



In Mexico, another important point of reference for these burgeoning movements in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century was the Frente, a social movement on the outskirts of Mexico City that in many ways recalled traditional peasant movements. This movement of *campesinos* [peasant farmers] fought a federal decree of expropriation that would have turned their municipality (San Salvador Atenco and thirteen surrounding villages) into an international airport for Mexico City in 2001. The Frente chose to articulate itself with networks of transnational anti-globalization movements. The Frente and their allies also produced more than fifteen documentaries from 2001 to 2010 and made these films valences through which the movement organized itself and its relationships with other movements. The most widely distributed of these documentaries, *Romper el Cerco* (canalseisdejulio & Promedios 2006), was intimately connected to La Otra Campaña from its inception and was produced collaboratively by a diversity of filmmakers, photographers, and journalists from around the world. It was also translated into at least five languages, and distributed online through Zapatista and IndyMedia networks. Other films were produced locally for consumption amongst national social movements, but with lofty aspirations of ‘making a revolution’ through film. Still others were produced locally for immediate local consumption, privileging an audience that would consider the films more ‘home-movies’ than ‘documentary film’.

This new era of social organizing poses serious challenges to theories of social movements, not because previous models were inadequate, but because social movements have moved on. We do not yet have the conceptual tools to be able to understand how a social movement can articulate itself without an identity and without demands. We have only just begun to understand the crucial roles of media production and distribution in these movements.

The Frente and the documentaries made about it lie at a crucial geographic and temporal intersection for understanding this new era of social organization. First, it is in many ways a traditional peasant movement not unlike many from the very beginning of the twentieth century (see Mintz 2004, for instance). It also shares many characteristics with indigenous movements of the later twentieth century (Nash 1979, Warren 1998, Hale 2006, Stephen 2002, Gustafson 2009). While drawing on these histories of social organizing, the Frente chose to eschew these models of social organizing and create its own path alongside the emerging transnational networks of anti-capitalist movements. Second, the Frente arose with a contingent, but intimate connection with the EZLN [Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, or Zapatista Army for National Liberation], making it one of the first and geographically closest social movements to attempt to bring the organizational and mediatic lessons of this influential anti-globalization movement out of the Lacandon Jungle. Third, it also arose during the crucial time that the anti-globalization movements were forming, but before the Arab Spring and the #Occupy movements in which Twitter rose to prominence as the medium of choice. Only an examination of a movement that arose during this intermediate time can help us understand the foundational history of this important new era. Fourth, its use of film, a medium with a relatively slow temporality (Warner 2001), allows for an in-depth, close ethnographic examination of the multiple roles that media is playing in contemporary social movements.

This dissertation contributes to a political anthropology of social movements through three conceptual tools. I first argue that purposefully and socially cultivating a sense of collective self is a powerful ethical and political practice of individual and social transformation that has deep implications for broad cultural and social change. These changes go beyond conceiving of social and cultural change in terms of legal and institutional structures, to consider

less instrumentalized, more profound conceptions of change. This collective self does not attach itself to any single exclusive identity, but to the cultivation of a communitarian ethical disposition (Mahmood 2005) that is open to anyone. The development of a theory of this collective self is important to an anthropology of social movements because it allows us to understand how contemporary social movements are responding to and incorporating the difficulties presented by intersectionality, and transcending static, essentializing notions of identity.

Second, because this collective self is very broadly conceived, it opens up new possibilities and challenges for representing the movement and what it is trying to accomplish. I argue that the Frente used a strategy of ‘dramatic confrontation’ that drew attention away from Atenco residents as victims of oppression, and toward perpetrators and mechanisms of structural violence. Understanding these representational and tactical shifts helps complicate our understanding of the multiple ways that violence, confrontation, and visibility intersect with nonviolent social movement tactics. I argue that the Frente’s use of dramatic confrontation was successful in four overlapping ways: it disrupted dominant narratives about an invincible state and the inevitability of neoliberal ‘development’; it made the perpetrators of structural violence clearly visible; it gave agency to ‘victims’ of structural violence; and it left room for productive solutions. This strategy was not without its own ethical and political challenges, but I argue that the approach differs significantly from the depictions of suffering bodies usually presented by ‘outside’ scholars and filmmakers who are interested in representing structural violence and oppression.

Third, the practices that help cultivate this communitarian ethical disposition depart from Marxist social movements that rely on strategies of resistance to economic and political

structures. Instead, they are what I call ‘autonomy practices’: practices that create partial autonomies from the state and corporate capitalism, and innovate new economic and political structures. The distinction between ‘resistance practices’ and ‘autonomy practices’ is important to understanding contemporary shifts in transnational social movement networks that are resulting in greater articulation with anarchist thinking and organizing.

## **1.2 VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY/ANTHROPOLOGY OF MEDIA**

In the 1970s and 1980s, in efforts connected to the New Social Movements of the time, anthropologists like Terence Turner (1995) became very interested in the possibilities and political implications of ethnographic film. The excitement over the revolutionary potential of film was not new. As early as the Russian Revolution, film enthusiasts and filmmakers heralded the potential of film to celebrate the lives of working men and women and transform people’s consciousnesses (Barnouw 1993). Anthropologists like Turner, working in remote areas with indigenous peoples, taught people how to use film and video cameras and left the cameras behind. This was partially motivated by curiosity in what sort of films indigenous peoples would make as well as a desire to support indigenous peoples in efforts to defend their land, cultures, languages, and communities against imperialism and colonialism.

Visual Anthropology—a sub-discipline primarily interested in how anthropologists might use cameras methodologically as an ethnographic tool— from this era on became interested in ‘indigenous video’ or ‘indigenous filmmaking’. These scholars noted that collective or community media production—whether the medium was radio, film, or television—constituted a process that Faye Ginsburg has called “collective self-production” (1997: 120). Ginsburg conceived of this self-production in terms of building indigenous identities both within local

communities and for a broader, national audience. She argues that this process happened partially through the discourse of the products, but also through the face-to-face social networks, structures, and organizations that came about as a result of production efforts. Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod & Larkin (2002) call these social consequences ‘mediations.’ In the context of post-war Guatemala, Flores (2004) has noted that these mediated social transformations can occur without the product ever being finished or released. These transformations can occur independently of the texts being produced because these media create what Buddle (2008) has called an “alternative economy of practice” that “calls into being new forms of subjectivity and action, and with them come new collective senses of belonging” (2008:135).

Primarily interested in indigenous communities, these scholars have not described how the alternative economies of practice developed through indigenous media production have spiraled outward as a practice to effect processes of self-production. In Mexico the 1990’s, for instance, state-sponsored indigenous video programs held free workshops in filmmaking for indigenous communities. Initially producing films under the auspices of the National Indigenous Institute (INI), a federal agency, many of these filmmakers have gone on to champion filmmaking as an organizing tool for social movements that only partially overlap with indigenous movements (Cusi Wortham 2004). Established in the 1990s as one of the practices of the autonomous Zapatista communities in Chiapas (Halkin 2008), other non-indigenous social movements in Mexico began to take note of the potential of collaborative filmmaking in conjunction with social movements.

The use of community media in social movements did not develop exclusively through indigenous filmmaking. A robust literature in the disciplines of Cultural Studies, Communications, and Journalism have investigated similar uses of radical (Downing 1984),

alternative (Atton 2002), or citizens' (Rodríguez 2001) media. Mexico specifically also has a long and rich history of filmmaking that includes a very strong tradition of social documentary film (see for example Peláez 2006, Mendoza 2008) independent of indigenous video<sup>2</sup>. However, the deep engagement of the Zapatista movement and Kayapo communities in the broader movements against corporate capitalism (Kidd et al 2003, Coyer 2005) have meant that the alternative economies of media practice developed over time in indigenous movements have come to play a significant role in non-indigenous social movements.

Furthermore, as I discussed above, this new era of social movements does not articulate itself around concrete identifiers like 'indigenous'. If media production, particularly filmmaking, has been important in the production of identities (Ginsburg 1997), what happens when these identities are no longer a primary point of articulation of the movement? What kind of collective self is being produced? How does cultural production work alongside movements for political change if there is no politicized identity to bring them together? How do these economies of practice stretch outward through diverse networks and become relevant in other contexts?

This dissertation contributes to an Anthropology of Media by arguing that the alternative economies of practice developed in media production and distribution are a creative arena in which particular ethical dispositions can be innovated, developed, and policed. I argue that the intersection between cultural production (the production of electronic media, theater, and material visual arts) and self production (a more abstract production of ethical disposition) is a crucial locus for examining how social movements help to bring about elusive social and cultural changes that exist outside the grasp of legal and institutional frameworks. I argue further that the practices that mediate social transformation are not limited to production process; distribution practices can also be transformative. In the particular case of the Frente, I argue that media

production and distribution practices articulated themselves around a disposition that I call *compañerismo*, an ethical and political disposition that emphasizes communitarianism, collectivity, and a disregard for profit and personal gain. Film gifting, screening, and selling practices all helped in the collective production of self by creating non-corporate capitalist economies of reciprocity and consumption.

These economies are very small and form only partial and contingent autonomies from larger political and economic forces. However, in a time in which corporate capitalism has seeped into nearly every aspect of social, political, and cultural life for people around the world and these economic forces attempt to construct people as autonomous, profit-seeking, self-interested individuals (Giroux 2011), creating a space for the cultivation of interdependent, generous, self-sacrificing collectivities is no small social, cultural, or political feat.

In the early 1980's, bell hooks criticized an ideology of "competitive, atomistic liberal individualism" (from Eisenstein 1981) that "undermines the potential radicalism of feminist struggle" (hooks 1984: 8). Her arguments were important in developing perspectives of intersectionality described above. At the time, hooks believed that the answer to such damaging liberal individualism was the development of new feminist theory that could elevate feminist movements through consciousness. This conception of transmitting or awakening consciousness through ideologies that can be transmitted in media (academic books as well as documentary films) is at least as old as Marxism and pervades literature concerned with the intersection of social movements and media. I argue here that the development of powerful collectivities and senses of collective self does not need ideology to operate, but can be innovated, developed, and cultivated in creative practices of media production and distribution. Media production is special, not because of its potential to reach millions across the world, but because it can be a

collective, creative process that allows for the development of subjectivities and ‘selves’ in social, economic, and political contexts not prefigured by large, pre-existing social, economic, and political institutional structures.

### **1.3 *HABITUS*, THE CULTIVATION OF SELF, AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION**

The third contribution of this dissertation is to a body of social theory interested in the cultivation of ethical dispositions through *habitus*. Pierre Bourdieu (1977) popularized the conception of *habitus*, but as Mahmood (2005) points out, it is not his concept, but is at least as old as Aristotle. I find, as Mahmood did, that the Aristotelian tradition, rather than Bourdieu’s sense of the word, that is most useful. Bourdieu argued that social conditions result in habitual practices that constitute a specific *habitus* and create a certain disposition in people that makes them disposed to think, live, and act in certain ways. His conception of *habitus* is very important to understanding how social structures and culture—even propensities toward differential aesthetic preferences (Bourdieu 1986)—are reproduced through practice.

Mahmood (2005) poses challenges to Bourdieu’s theory of *habitus* by returning to Aristotle’s conception, which uses the term to describe the conscious cultivation of ethical disposition toward specific virtues (Aristotle 1941). Mahmood (2005) shows how women in the mosque movement in Cairo transform themselves into more pious subjects through consciously cultivating a pious *habitus* that results in a more pious ethical disposition. She argues that the action of praying precedes the ethical disposition; they do not pray because they are pious, they become pious subjects through praying as a continual practice. This mechanism of self-transformation is a significant departure from a tradition of Marxian thought in which subjects’ consciousnesses are awakened through ideology. There is a robust anthropological literature that



uses *habitus* to understand transformation of self, especially in religious contexts (Asad 1993, Csordas 1997, Lester 2005), and even in the context of media consumption practices (Abu-Lughod 2005, Hirschkind 2006).

This dissertation contributes to this body of social theory in two interconnected ways. First, I reconnect Mahmood's conception of *habitus* to the realm of cultural production that interested Bourdieu. Through bringing her theory of how one brings about transformations of self back to theories of cultural production (understood as the production of material and visual arts), we can begin to understand how cultural production is involved in processes of transformation (in contrast to Bourdieu's analysis of social reproduction). Second, this dissertation challenges theories of individual self-formation and self-transformation by imbuing them with a sense of collective, social process. Individuals exist as social beings in which their conceptions of self are produced in social contexts, never in isolation as individuals<sup>3</sup>. Because the self is contingent, individuals may also have multiple, intersecting conceptions of self. Therefore, the 'self' is produced and exists simultaneously on multiple scales in which the individual is an arbitrary level of analysis. This conception of 'self' can help us understand a sense of collective self that people reproduce and transform through practice, even as this collectivity helps to produce and transform individuals. When taken together, these two contributions can help us understand cultural production not just as the production of material arts, but as a collective social practice that produces and transforms 'culture' itself, understood in broad anthropological terms.

## 1.4 METHODS

My understanding of the transformative role of visual media evolved slowly over the course of more than five years of continual dialogue and engagement with social documentary filmmakers and members of the Frente and allied social movements. In turn, my engagement with Mexican social documentary film was rooted in almost a decade of frequent visits to Mexico and experiences with Mexican political cultures, long before I dreamed of entering a Ph.D. program in Anthropology. The primary dissertation fieldwork was conducted during two pilot studies in the summers of 2006 and 2007 and eighteen months of fieldwork from the end of May 2008 until November 2009. I lived in Mexico City during the summer pilot studies and for approximately eight months in 2008 and the beginning of 2009. Following this time, I spent five months living in Atenco, and another five months living in the city of Oaxaca de Juarez in southern Mexico. In Oaxaca I investigated the use of documentary film in another local social movement called the Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca [the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca, or APPO). While the material I collected in Oaxaca relates closely to the questions pursued here—including connections and articulations between these movements—my focus in what follows is on the Frente and their relationships with a diversity of national and international filmmakers.

My familiarity with the Frente through independent media began during my first pilot study in 2006, and I worked toward it through contacts made on the outskirts of the movement starting in 2007. I met my first contact from the Atenco region, the man I call Virgilio, for the first time in Mexico City in the fall of 2008. I was already a familiar face at Frente events in Mexico City before I moved to Atenco in February 2009. After my move to Oaxaca de Juarez in

the summer of 2009, I continued to travel back to Mexico City and Atenco with some regularity. Additionally, a commission from the Frente came to Oaxaca twice during the time that I stayed there.

In each location I spent as much time as possible at the geographic and temporal intersections of social movement and film-related activities that I saw as my primary ‘field sites.’ These included film screenings, political marches, *plantones* [occupations], round-table discussions, panel presentations, and any other political events that I became aware of, however tangentially they seemed to be related to the Frente or media production. I was often surprised by the interpersonal and political connections between seemingly disparate political and media events. In between these events, I participated in daily life of the cities I lived in and, as much as possible, in the daily lives of members of social movements and filmmakers. I attended *quinceañeras*, funerals, religious celebrations, cultural events, dances, and fairs with the older, widowed friend I lived with in Atenco. I got up early to make tamales and *tlacoyos* (bean-filled handmade tortillas) for large celebrations with her and other women in Atenco, and I stayed out late at parties with filmmakers, poets, artists, and nationally known activists in Texcoco. In Mexico City, I attended upscale parties in Colonia del Valle and Coyoacán with Mexico City’s leftist elite, I exercised at the *fresa* [upscale] gym near my house in Villa Coapa, I attended religious meetings and meditation conferences at Casa Tibet in La Condesa with the Buddhist Mexican family that I lived with, and I spent countless hours travelling through the city on busses and in the metro. I also hung out with anarchists from Argentina, Brazil, France, Italy, and the US who came to Mexico to meet Zapatistas, chatted often with pirate video vendors selling their wares on the sidewalk, and had long conversations about international revolutionary politics with shoe-shine men.

During this time, I conducted and recorded 58 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with members of social movements, filmmakers, and distributors. Frequently, these categories of interview subjects overlapped significantly. Most of these interviews lasted between an hour and two hours. I presented myself to interview subjects as an anthropologist interested in the role of media, especially film, in social movements. I asked each interviewee how they would like to be referred to in publication and I have, for the most part, followed their preferences. Exceptions are Virgilio and Humberto, both of whom wished to be named fully in publication for two reasons: first, so that I would not appropriate their stories and words behind a protective veil of anonymity, and second under a reasoning of, “What else can they do to me? They [any authorities that may take retribution] already know everything.” Although the decision was a difficult one, I decided to go against their wishes and refer to them here anonymously. Ultimately, this decision was based on the fact that some of the information presented here about them could be used against them in judicial processes (several of which are ongoing) and I did not want to be responsible for presenting any further incriminating evidence. I refer to public figures and most filmmakers using their full, professional names.

My presentation as a young, unmarried white woman and a foreigner deeply impacted my interactions with people during participant observation and interviews. As a North American<sup>4</sup> woman I was also keenly aware that people who look a lot like me often come to Mexico to drink and have sex with local men. It was often assumed, sometimes by people I have known for more than a decade and consider close friends, that I had come to Mexico to find a husband. Men that I interviewed often propositioned me and I continually fought perceptions (among interviewees and others) that my interviews with men were dates. As a result, I interviewed married couples together whenever possible. This may have effected the interviewees’

presentation of information, but I believe these joint interviews were more, rather than less accurate. Early on in my fieldwork I learned to subtly triangulate information with other interviewees to counterbalance men who exaggerated facts greatly, presumably to impress me.

As I suggest in the story above about Manuel, most people were wary of me as a spy of some sort, working either for the Mexican or the US government. Because of this perception, I always walked a fine line between asking qualitative questions about opinions, processes, and histories and delving into specifics about names, dates, and exact locations. From an analytical perspective, the lack of this kind of information (who did what, when, and where?) was sometimes frustrating, but I was constantly aware that this type of information is exactly the most useful data for intelligence agencies. I refrained from asking these questions not only to show that I was not interested in incriminating anyone, but also because revealing this kind of information put both my informants and myself in danger. Through this process, I have come to think that a lot of misinformation and misunderstanding can be hidden behind sometimes inconsequential facts, while a great deal of truth can be found in stories that lack some specificity.

Lastly, unlike many places in the world, people from all walks of life in Mexico know exactly what an anthropologist is and how they have often been agents of colonialism and cultural imperialism. I have more than once been subjected to extended pontifications about Robert Redfield and Oscar Lewis (some surprisingly complimentary) before carrying on with an interview. As such, if not a spy, I was often seen as the worst kind of *protagonist* [egoist]: the North American who comes to Mexico to appropriate stories for the benefit of their own careers. Much like Virgilio and Humberto's wariness of appropriation, this accusation of protagonismo is not unfounded. Much like the people represented in this dissertation, I too struggle against self-

interest within the sometimes constraining anthropological tradition. My friends and informants helped me appreciate the deep, and possibly irreconcilable, contradiction of building an individual career and benefitting personally from representing injustice and the suffering of others. In a modest attempt to mitigate the difficulties of this contradiction, and also to be completely truthful with people, I identified myself as deeply committed to social justice, and in Mexico to learn how to make better social movements in the United States. Following Hale (2006), I always asked in interviews what my responsibilities as a foreign researcher were to the Frente and associated social movements, and what I could do to help. Most people told me that there was nothing I could do but tell the truth. I have tried to live up to that promise.

## **1.5 THE ORGANIZATION OF THIS DISSERTATION**

The chapters that follow are arranged thematically and roughly historically. In Chapter 2, I introduce Atenco and narrate the recent history of the Frente using stories and memories of its members. I begin with a tour of Atenco that members of the Frente often give to foreign visitors. I then use members' narratives to describe the region's recent history with social organizing throughout the 1990s. I then turn toward local moral and dramatic interpretations of the federal expropriation of community lands in 2001. I argue that people experienced the expropriation through a variety of overlapping moral lenses, including beliefs about the connections between land and cultural heritage, a religious lens informed by Catholicism, and a political lens informed by Marxist and anarchist social movements. Each of these interpretations cast the decree as a deeply symbolic, moral struggle between right and wrong. I argue that the Frente's political claims were based not on 'rights', but on an idea of human beings as universally embedded in social and moral economies that the state has an

obligation to recognize. Finally, I use first-person narratives to describe some of the political strategies and concrete daily practices that the Frente became known for. The history of these practices is important because they became part of an ethical *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977, Mahmood 2005) through which members of the Frente enacted and created their new role as *compañeros*, a conception I discuss at length in Chapter 3. I argue throughout that the construction of dramatic narrative and a concern for building moral selves has been integral to the Frente's struggle to gain legitimacy and build political power.

Chapter 3 discusses the construction and maintenance of *compañerismo* as an ethical practice. This is the spirit of solidarity that guided so many of Manuel's involvements with the Frente and social documentary. *Atenquenses* [people from Atenco] argue that they are human beings like people all over the world: social beings embedded in a moral economy. This conceptualization entails a profound commitment to collectivity and sociability, not as a cultural trait specific to Atenco, but as a universal human value. In this chapter, I show how this argument entails a conception of human beings for whom competitive, individualistic economic self-interest (connected to neoliberal governmentality) is damaging, and for whom an ethical, selfless commitment to collectivity is beneficial. I argue that participants cultivated and honed this commitment to collectivity through their participation in the Frente. I call this commitment, as do people in Atenco, being a *compañero* or a *compañera*. In this chapter, I show how being a *compañero/a* is a sense of self that is produced as an ethical disposition through political practice. I argue that *compañerismo* is produced in a positive, creative way through practice and is also policed socially through conceptions of *protagonismo* [protagonism].

I use three examples of filmmakers to show how *compañerismo* and *protagonismo* have played out in the lives and political practices of individual filmmakers. I argue that filmmaking

is a crucial site to examine these processes because, in the case of the Frente, it lies at the intersection between collective transformation through cultural production (the creation of material, creative arts) and transformation of self through practice. Examining filmmaking allows us bring together theories of how social movements work to transform society and theories of how media work. Even so, filmmaking as a practice of cultivating *compañerismo* is deeply flawed. While filmmaking is not the only, or even the most important, process through which *compañerismo* is cultivated, it is precisely because filmmaking is a contradictory practice that it makes a productive site to examine the challenges and implications of cultivating this disposition. More importantly, the collective process of filmmaking and cultivating *compañerismo* is crucial for understanding the new roles that media is playing in twenty-first century social movements.

In Chapter 4, I examine how the Frente used dramatic representation in street theater and documentary films as a strategic tool. This strategy can also be seen in the vignette about Manuel presented above. Manuel was much more comfortable telling me about throwing Molotov cocktails and selling documentaries than he was about how he was injured or victimized by police. The Frente have used what I call ‘dramatic confrontations’ to converse with the state and accomplish immediate goals, but I argue that these confrontations also had another, wider audience in mind. Dramatic confrontations provided a stage for the Frente and state agents to communicate in physical ways with each other and for the benefit of interested onlookers. I argue that the Frente’s ethical framework poses significant challenges as a political strategy because it sets itself against the state, and yet makes demands that are beyond the capabilities of the state or any particular institution to respond. In this chapter, I show that the Frente used instances of visible, immediate, physical violence to represent and make visible large-scale



structural violence. Rather than casting themselves as victims in these dramatic confrontations, the Frente chose to portray themselves in street theater, direct actions, and films as a strong and capable adversary imbued with moral authority. This casting helped them accomplish specific practical changes within the capacity of the government to enact, but it also had more broad representational impacts. I argue that the Frente's use of dramatic confrontation was successful in four overlapping ways: it disrupted dominant narratives about an invincible state and the inevitability of neoliberal 'development'; it made the perpetrators of structural violence clearly visible; it gave agency to 'victims' of structural violence; and it left room for productive solutions. However, the strategy also had several disadvantages. By utilizing dramatic confrontation and representing themselves as strong adversaries, the Frente also made itself vulnerable to accusations that they *created* the conflict (rather than merely making pre-existing violence visible). They also risked an escalation of physical state violence; something that occurred in May 2006.

I begin the chapter with a discussion of visual representations of structural violence. In order to illuminate how confrontation can be a productive means of representing structural violence, I contrast it with a strategy that makes use of images of sick and suffering bodies. I then discuss the primary symbol of the Frente, the machete, and how this symbol was used (on screen and off) during one political demonstration in Mexico City to create productive and visually compelling dramatic confrontations that benefit from the four characteristics listed above. I then turn toward the confrontation in 2006 in which an escalation of violence occurred. I argue that the state acted outside of its legal framework to discipline the collectivism so carefully cultivated by members of the Frente. I also conclude that the Frente's strategy of visual representation deeply challenged ideas of nonviolence and human rights even as they invoked

these conceptions. I then bring the analysis back to the role of filmmaking. I argue that because the struggles of the Frente, and the state's response, are beyond the scope of citizenship rights and the state, filmmaking and dramatic confrontations that make structural violence visible are a more significant battleground in the Mexican context than policy and laws.

Chapter 5 focuses on the practices of film distribution as a political and economic practice. As in the example of Manuel presented at the beginning of the chapter, I show how processes and networks that form off screen are integral to how social documentaries operate as political tools. Although Manuel is part of an extended transnational network of allies that use production and distribution, in this chapter I discuss only the immediate context of the Frente. I argue that three key ways that the Frente used films—gifting, screening, and selling—facilitated, or mediated (Ginsburg 2002, Turner 2002), the cultivation of the ethical disposition of *compañerismo* discussed in Chapter 3. For more than a decade, the Frente has been fighting against neoliberal corporate capitalism and part of their efforts have been to create alternative, non-corporate capitalist economies. Gifting, screening, and selling social documentaries are all non-corporate capitalist economic practices that have helped create alternative economies on a face-to-face interpersonal level. Gifting films on DVD helps strengthen relationships and solidarities in a very Maussian anthropological sense. Digital films are a physical 'home-made' product of social movements. They are produced without regard to private property, exploitative labor, or profit-motives, and they are infinitely reproducible at virtually no cost. Because of these attributes, gifting DVDs and passing them on is an important practice in cultivating a non-capitalist material economy (Escobar 2009). Screening films brings people together in one place to interact face-to-face with social movement representatives in a low-barrier organizational capacity that builds solidarity with the Frente and between social movements. Watching the film

in this kind of a setting is also a practice of non-capitalist consumption. Selling films helps to widen social movement networks and raise money in an ethical, non-corporate capitalist way to support travelling caravans.

I begin this chapter with a discussion of media theory that draws connections between media practices and social organization. I then present three ethnographic vignettes that illustrate the non-capitalist practices of gifting, screening, and selling documentary films. I conclude the chapter by arguing that the Frente used films to cultivate face-to-face relationships with people regardless of the specific goals of the movement at the time, and the specific content of the films. I argue that the content of the human rights documentaries being distributed in 2008-2010 was in tension with how they were being used as a tool for political organizing.

In Chapter 6, I argue that the cultivation of *compañerismo*, the dramatic confrontations, and the alternative, non-capitalist economies I have discussed in previous chapters are not simply forms of resistance to neoliberal governmentality (Lazar 2008); they are an attempt to create partial autonomies from the state and corporate capitalism. I argue that there is a productive distinction between what I call ‘resistance practices’ (practices meant to impede and speak out against) and ‘autonomy practices’ (the daily practices that when added together make the state and large-scale corporate capitalism less relevant to one’s life). Autonomy practices are a central part of the Frente’s political strategy, as well as that of many of the filmmakers who made the human rights documentaries I presented in the last chapter. The prevailing literature on human rights videos theorizes the political work they do almost exclusively in terms of communication conduits that induce ‘outside’ audiences to act through legal means (Keck & Sikkink 1998, McLagan 2003, Gregory 2006). I argue that this approach obscures how media creates and reshapes fields of social and political practice through local networks of face-to-face human

interactions. Within a strategy of autonomy, there is no ‘outside’ audience that needs to be convinced, mobilized, or won over; there is only an ‘inside’ collective that needs to be well-informed and organized. The emphasis on autonomy practices reflects and helps constitute the recent shift from Marxist-inspired social action and strategy to Anarchist-inspired social action and strategy seen in transnational anti-globalization movements (Juris 2008).

I begin the chapter with a discussion of prevailing scholarship on the mechanisms through which social documentary film operates as a social and political force. I argue that this communications model does not take into account the intentions and social practices of documentary filmmakers in Mexico. I then present the conceptions of ‘resistance practice’ and ‘autonomy practice’ as a way of understanding this discrepancy. I briefly present the social movement La Ota Campaña as an important genealogy for autonomy strategies and practices in Mexico. Lastly, I discuss the making of the film *Romper el Cerco* (Canalseisdejulio & Promedios 2006) as a case study in how *compañerismo*, dramatic confrontation, and non-capitalist economies operated during the making of the film. I use the concepts of resistance and autonomy practice to help understand the multiple valences through which documentary film production and distribution are constitutive of a field of social, political, and economic action that aids in cultural production. I conclude the chapter by bringing the discussion back to the Frente. By posing challenges to the distinction between filmmakers and film audiences, I tie together the ideas of *compañerismo*, making structural violence visible, and non-capitalist economies in the creative field of filmmaking to argue that social documentary films create a constitutive arena for the social production of culture.

Chapter 7 is a short postscript that discusses the practical political implications of the arguments presented in the previous chapters. I discuss these implications through describing

a new social movement allied with the Frente that has developed in Mexico after my primary fieldwork: #YoSoy132. I argue that the processes of social and political transformation described in this dissertation are significant to anthropology not because these movements will make concrete, instrumental legal change in the Mexican political system, but because it is the process through which much less visible—but much more profound—transformations of social, political, and cultural structures occur that deeply impact that peoples' lives around the world. Many consequences of social movements evade quantification and specific causal relationships because profound change is a complex collective process that takes a long time. This is especially true for a movement that seeks to dismantle all hierarchies. The world has yet to see a sudden dramatic government takeover that avoided all relationships of domination. This kind of movement, like the Frente and #YoSoy132, has little choice but to operate through collective processes that produce culture—that elusive object of anthropology that itself evades definition, instrumentality, and causality.

## CHAPTER 2: ATENCO AND ITS RECENT HISTORY

In this chapter, I introduce Atenco and narrate the recent history of the Frente using stories and memories of its members. I begin with a tour of Atenco that members of the Frente often give to foreign visitors. I then use members' narratives to describe the region's recent history with social organizing throughout the 1990s. I then turn toward local moral and dramatic interpretations of the federal expropriation of community lands in 2001. I argue that people experienced the expropriation through a variety of overlapping moral lenses, including beliefs about the connections between land and cultural heritage, a religious lens informed by Catholicism, and a political lens informed by Marxist and anarchist social movements. Each of these interpretations cast the decree as a deeply symbolic, moral struggle between right and wrong. I argue that the Frente's political claims were based not on 'rights', but an idea of human beings as universally embedded in social and moral economies that the state has an obligation to recognize. Finally, I use first-person narratives to describe some of the political strategies and concrete daily practices that the Frente became known for. The history of these practices is important because they became part of an ethical *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977, Mahmood 2005) through which members of the Frente enacted and created their new role as *compañeros*, a conception I discuss at length in Chapter 3. I argue throughout that the construction of dramatic narrative and a concern for building moral selves has been integral to the Frente's struggle to gain legitimacy and build political power.

### 2.1 MEANINGS OF ATENCO

I got a text from Virgilio<sup>5</sup> telling me to meet him at the Ejido Commission [*Comisario Ejidal*] offices in the center of Atenco. The *Comisario* is something like a farmer's cooperative.

The land of Atenco is not privately owned by farmers, but is *ejido*, communally owned and managed by the Comisario made up of the farmers who work it. Each farmer is assigned a plot that he farms and that he can pass down to his children and grandchildren. However, he can never sell his plot. If he moves away, ceases to farm, or if his children don't want to farm, he must give it back to the Ejido Commission and they will give it to someone else. The Comisario also manages the other communal lands of the town: the public park and swimming pools, and the land that isn't useful as farmland. The Comisario also owns a few tractors for plowing and cultivating that they loan out to *ejidatarios* (farmers on ejido land) and a water truck to transport water from the central park to fields. The Comisario also serves as the gathering place and base of operations of the Frente de Pueblos en Defensa de la Tierra.

Traveling to this first meeting at the Comisario in Atenco helped me to better understand the geography of the political imaginary in Mexico surrounding Atenco. Filmmakers and friends in Mexico City spoke of Atenco as if it were in the middle of nowhere and took days to travel there, even though the journey from downtown Mexico City usually takes under an hour. One filmmaker, who by 2009 had made three influential films about Atenco, told me there would be no reason to spend much time in Atenco because there was really nothing there. In contrast, Virgilio told me to meet him at the Comisario of Atenco as if it were the center of the universe. The particularities of the history and place (Escobar 2009) of Atenco are heavy with meaning, but there is an incredible diversity of these meanings. Atenco has continually been headline news for over ten years, a central node of political organizing in Mexico, and a meeting place for anti-capitalist and anti-globalization activists from all over the world. In this sense, it is famous and important to national and global politics. Even so, in most other ways it is not very different from thousands of other small municipalities throughout Mexico, and (as the filmmaker

intimated) it is not a particularly exciting place to visit. Part of the continual struggle of the Frente has been to convince the federal government and a national public that Atenco is not a ‘nothing’ that needs to be replaced with ‘something’, to inscribe the geography of Atenco with the political imaginary of a place that is meaningful, worthwhile, and even a model and an inspiration to others.

Virgilio invited me on a ritualized tour of Atenco that almost all journalists, academics, students, and other outside visitors receive when visiting. The most widely circulated film about Atenco, *Romper el Cerco* (Canalseisdejulio 2006), begins with scenes taken from Canalseisdejulio’s tour. The famous Zapatista spokesperson Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos and his entourage were given the tour in 2006 amidst a densely packed crowd of admirers. The tour was even given to a small group of bewildered American college students who visited Atenco under the instructions of a well-meaning teacher while I was living there. As it is the way that people from the Frente most frequently represent themselves and Atenco to outside visitors, it is an appropriate place to begin to describe Atenco, both from the perspective of the political imaginaries that the name ‘Atenco’ connotes in Mexican media, and the physical place where people make their everyday lives. I introduce Atenco first as most Mexicans have encountered it: through the dramatic significance that has come to be attached to the place and the name ‘Atenco’. I will then briefly describe the region’s relationship to agriculture and economic development before delving into the history of political organizing in the region. This recent history is important to understanding how Atenco came to be such a politically charged place, and why more than fifteen films have been made about it over the last ten years.

Even though I wasn’t sure how to find the Comisario once in Atenco, judging by the way that Virgilio talked about it, it seemed to be the kind of place everyone locally knows how to get



to. I took the forty-minute bus ride from Mexico City along the Texcoco-Lechería highway and told the driver that I wanted to get off at San Salvador Atenco. Saying the name out loud seemed illicit, and, raising an eyebrow, the bus driver seemed to think so too. The name ‘Atenco’, although the proper indigenous name of the area (San Salvador Atenco refers to a very specific center of Atenco) is now synonymous in the national political imaginary with dramatic social movement: an incredible triumph over the state and neoliberalism in 2002, and a devastating repression in 2006, one of the worst Mexico has ever experienced.



For many Mexicans, the name is synonymous with uncontrolled chaotic violence on the part of the ejidatarios. The place that Atenco plays in the national imaginary is polarized and plays out on the front pages of national newspapers and magazines. The sympathetic image could be represented by the front page of the left-leaning newspaper *La Jornada* (published by the National Autonomous University of Mexico, UNAM) on July 13, 2002 in the heat of the

Frente's first political struggle. The federal government had expropriated all of the land of Atenco and many surrounding villages and farmland to build a new international airport for Mexico City. The people in the area organized against the expropriation and succeeded, after a few very tense stand-offs and physical clashes with police, in convincing the federal government to abrogate the decree (see Alcaayaga 2002, Camacho Guzmán 2008). The headline, from a tense moment in the confrontation, reads "Atenco on guard". Although the sub-headlines refer variously to the "project in Texcoco", "Ejidatarios from San Salvador", "campesinos" and "the population", as actors and subjects of various news stories throughout the paper, the name 'Atenco' stands in for each of these various actors and places in the headline. Atenco is represented visually by an image that takes up the majority of the front page: the dramatic silhouette of a single anonymous young man standing in front of a bonfire on asphalt. He looks to the side rather than toward the camera and his body language is not confrontational. He appears to be unarmed. It was headlines like this that popularized the idea of Atenco as a single political actor, sometimes dramatically romanticized as in this image.

The second image could be represented by the front cover of the right-leaning political magazine *Vértigo* on May 7, 2006 that takes a more critical perspective of Atenco's history. It was published to describe the second incident Atenco is known for: an occasion four years later in which residents and police clashed over the arrest of several local political leaders. The image is of many young men crowded onto the hood of a car. More young men are beside and crowded behind the car. All of their faces are covered with cloth or shirts so that only their eyes are exposed. One man, perched high on the car, is shirtless and wearing a gas mask. Many of the men are making what seem to be aggressive gestures toward the camera, and the men highest in the picture nearly stand on the moving car with their arms in the air. Upon closer inspection, the

viewer may note that the aggressive gestures they are making are peace signs. The headline, written in large letters across the bottom of the image reads, “They violate the rule of law: ATENCO AGAIN.” In this case, the name ‘Atenco’ stands in for a specific meaningful physical confrontation that the reader is assumed to be familiar with.

These headlines are one example of how the meaning of the name ‘Atenco’ has come to stand in for a variety of emotionally and politically charged ideas in the national political imaginary. For many Mexicans, as the article in *Vértigo* makes clear, the name is synonymous with uncontrolled chaotic violence. For others, the American filmmaker Greg Berger, for instance, who made two films about Atenco in 2001 and 2002, Atenco symbolizes the capacity of people’s movements to triumph over corrupt government and multi-national corporations. The romantic imagery of the *Jornada* headline hints at the connotation of loving respect and pride that many people have for ‘Atenco’.

In neither headline does ‘Atenco’ represent a geographical region where a diversity of people live and make their daily lives. Instead it represents a specific history of contested and highly emotional recent events that might be compared to the names ‘Kent State’, ‘Columbine’, or ‘Ground Zero’ in the United States. These place names overflow with meaning and emotion much like the name ‘Atenco’.

The political significance of the name is so heavy and divisive that it was difficult for me, as a foreigner and an outsider, to say the name aloud to a stranger, even a bus driver, and admit that I was going there. The same filmmaker who told me there was really no reason to spend much time in Atenco told me that the local officials removed the sign at the city limits that identifies the place as Atenco. They replaced it with a sign that labels it as ‘San Salvador.’ ‘Atenco’ was simply too charged a label to remain on the sign. Aside from erasing the

indigenous name of the place by relying solely on its Catholic Saint's name, this superficial erasure further divorces the abstract, emotionally and politically charged meanings of 'Atenco' from the physical location of San Salvador Atenco; a place with a market on Mondays, a juice stand in front of the church, a large central park with swimming pools, street vendors, bicycle taxis, and unique local festivals and traditions. The purpose of the standard tour I was about to receive was to map this heavily charged imaginary of 'Atenco' onto a real place with real people, both as ordinary and extraordinary as any other place, but with a history connoting incredible popular power and devastating violence.

## **2.2 THE PLACE**

As for most Mexican towns and cities, the center square of San Salvador Atenco is built around a large open space with the town's church on one side and government buildings along another. Atenco's plaza also has a tall, rusty water tower standing alongside the churchyard with a laundromat and two cell phone stores behind it. The arches of the government building face the church and the water tower. As I approached, a policeman in black body armor got a soda out of the vending machine outside his office under the arches. It was difficult for me to cut through the heavily politically and emotionally charged images that I had seen repeatedly over the last few years and experience this mundane small town scene as a real place rather than a scene from a movie. It was even more difficult to see a police officer calmly drinking a soda in this place that I associated entirely with the most brutal police violence I had ever seen on film.

Right next door to the policeman was a scene I knew well from countless documentaries and scenes of political violence: a set of concrete steps leading up to a stage with an enormous mural painted behind it on two sides. The mural graphically illustrated the political imaginary

that I mapped onto the place, a giant portrait of Zapata surrounded by symbols of the local struggle. Images of men riding horses, red bandanas and machetes are all strong symbols of the Frente. A woman's face painted red and black references their ties to anarchist movements, and the image of a "viejo", a man with a beard wearing a white three-piece suit references a tradition of local cultural festivals. I knew this mural from images of press conferences announcing the retention or release of "retained" government officials, demanding the release of prisoners, and one famous image of a half-naked man crouched on his hands and knees over a pool of blood, an abandoned combat boot by his head. I was standing on that very spot.

Across the street from the steps was a tall sign that at one time had lit up from the inside. It had a marquee, but now just said, "*Cine Teatro Atenco*" (Atenco Movie Theater). The sign indicated that the steps I recognized were leading into an auditorium that at one time was used as a movie theater, and a meeting place for general assemblies of the ejidatarios or of the entire municipality. (The sign that reads "Auditorium Emiliano Zapata" is covered by the EZLN banner in the image above.) This was the auditorium where Virgilio told me government officials were held in 2002 for days in a dramatic televised stand-off with the state government. It was the place where the film *Atenco, un crimen de estado* [Atenco, a crime of the state] (Colectivo Klamvé 2006) showed people taking refuge as they watched their neighbors and family members on a small television in 2006, chasing police off of the closed highway with rocks and machetes. The film *Romper el Cerco* [Breaking the Siege] (canalseisdejulio & Promedios 2006) shows this auditorium in the background of scenes of terrific violence, explaining that people taking refuge there were pulled out of it before being beaten and raped by police on their way to prison. I hadn't realized that the police station was only a few yards from this spot, just out of frame to the right in the image above. This sudden realization challenged

the way that I thought about the conflict between the Frente and police. They coexisted in this space peacefully for five years, the police being able to see from their windows who was coming in and out of the auditorium. After the repression, they had coexisted here for three more years without incident. It was a horrific reminder of the continual tensions that exist in Atenco, but also a reminder that the scenes of conflict I associated with the place represented a few horrific days surrounded by decades of close living and working conditions.

On the other side of the auditorium from the police station is the Comisario (the white building with the balcony in the image above). It wasn't labeled, but was easily recognizable. It was absolutely covered in the symbols of the Frente: spray painted political slogans and stencils, posters advertising political events. Sheets with political slogans on them hung from the balcony of the second story. All of the windows on the second floor were blocked out with posters demanding that political prisoners be let free. One stencil depicted two men with their mouths open, presumably yelling, with their fists raised in the air, one with a machete. The words, "Viva Tierra y Libertad!" (Long live land and liberty!) were stenciled across the top and amongst the corn. The machete, the most recognizable symbol of the Frente, was painted or stenciled everywhere. This artwork marked the building as something different from the buildings around it. The graffiti yelled, assertively, confidently, that this place was a center of agricultural pride and political fearlessness. The transitory nature of the posters, graffiti, and painted sheets gave it a sense that here was a place that was active, and in a constant process of being constructed and re-imagined.

One stencil showed cornstalks wearing Zapatista balaclavas, referencing the Frente's ties to the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, and the commonality of their identification with agriculture. Another stencil showed a face that I recognized as a political prisoner from Oaxaca

who had recently been arrested. The style of the stencil was not local, but recalled the distinctive street art of Oaxaca, indicating that friends of this political prisoner had come here to paint his face on this wall. These references to other social movements declared the political strength of the Frente, and the support they had from movements throughout Mexico.

### **2.3 CONTINUING STRUGGLE**

Before I could think of what to do next, I heard Virgilio calling my name. He stood in the doorway of the Comisario, behind a narrow metal-framed glass door. He led me through the small vestibule and then up the stairs, the only place to go from the vestibule. The second floor was one large, open space. All along the left side were windows with balconies overlooking the plaza. Five or six mattresses were stacked in the far corner. Across from them on the inside wall, a few computers sat on a table. A young man was sitting at one of the computers reading a webpage. Along the same wall, opposite the balconies, was a table covered in boxes, posters, signs stapled to wooden planks, folded sheets painted with political slogans, and an enormous papier mâché puppet. Above this table was a white-board on which a large white piece of paper had been taped with masking tape with the heading “Festival Cultural de Resistencia” [Cultural Festival of Resistance] with items listed below such as “lucha x presos politicos” [struggle for political prisoners] and “lucha x mujeres campesinas” [struggle for women peasant farmers]. Next to the white board was a chalkboard with a few announcements on it listing dates and times. In the center of the room was a table around which half a dozen middle-aged men were sitting eating cookies and drinking orange Fanta. They all appeared to be in their fifties and sixties, with dark brown skin and deep lines in their cheeks and under their eyes, wearing jeans, boots, and button-down flannel shirts or colorful woolen vests.

They were discussing the new announcement, given just an hour or more earlier, that once again there were plans to buy up and develop the land of Atenco. There were plans for an ecotourism park and a series of hotels and upscale shopping malls, a tourist corridor. Virgilio showed me the contents of a legal-sized manila envelope sitting in front of him while one of his visitors poured me a Styrofoam cup of Fanta and offered me some cookies. The papers were photocopied from the originals, first copies of an official decree with its flourishing signature and rubber stamp. Then photocopied maps of where they planned to develop.

One man announced quite formally and eloquently that they wouldn't sell. There were too many people who have died, who are in prison, who have been raped, for them to simply give up and sell right now. There was a moment of silence before another man spoke. He said that even if they offer one farmer one million pesos for his land (about \$100,000 USD), what would he do with it? First, he's going to buy a new car, which will be 100,000 pesos, then he'll work on either buying a new house or fixing up the one that he has, which could easily cost 800,000. If he doesn't, his family will want to go on vacation. They'll go to Cancun or to Acapulco and the money will be gone in no time. And then he'll have no job, no land, and no money. He'll end up working in a hotel, or in a department store, or the ecological park as a poorly paid slave while the owners of what used to be his land are getting rich.

Virgilio pointed out that the parks that might be built there charge over 100 pesos per person to get in and there are thousands of people that come every day. The ecotourism park will be very, very lucrative and they will miss out on all of that if they just sell the land. He said that they have to develop it so that they become the business owners instead of selling it to others that will make the money. One of the neighbors had constructed a few greenhouses and was growing tomatoes and squash instead of corn and beans. He was making money at it. If they



could get a few investors, they could also have a series of greenhouses and could set up shop around the new ecotourism park to sell vegetables. He had been talking with someone from a local university about organic farming methods and he figured if they did it organically, they could make more money. Water was another important issue. They need water and the ecotourism park would take a lot of it.

He started to write out points on a blank sheet of paper. Their demands would be that they want to make a deal in which they will be the business owners in their own projects and will continue to have access to water. They decided that someone would go look for the president of the farmers' association and tell them that they weren't going to sell and that they had conditions. They would do it at noon tomorrow. He asked a young man who had come in if he had a camera to record. He replied that he did, an mp4 video camera, and there would be several people recording what they could the next day while they tried to strike a deal.

Virgilio announced that this time around, they had to have a new strategy. Before, when the authorities came to expropriate their land to build an international airport, they were made out to be the aggressive radicals because they went against a legal decree. This time, he said, we need to have an agreement with them from the very start. That way, when they go off of the agreement (which they will because the government always does) *they* will be the ones who are doing something illegal, and *they* are the ones who will have to radicalize to get what they want. The written agreement and the video of the meeting would be proof that the government officials were the radicals. "They don't even really want to make an ecological park," Virgilio went on, "It's just something they are saying now so that people will go along with it. Once it is their land, who knows what they will do with it."

As the meeting wound down a man named Omar appeared and announced that he was there to take me to the fields. Omar insisted that I sit in the front seat and Virgilio climbed into the back seat with a man who looked like he might be in his 90s. Wedged between my seat and the gearshift was a well-worn, and recently sharpened machete in a leather sheath. “That’s so that you can take a picture of me on the hill with my machete raised in the air,” Omar said. I stammered and said with not a little embarrassment that I didn’t have a good camera, just the one on my phone. I pulled out my digital sound recorder. “This is my recorder,” I said. Omar gave me a very disappointed look.

It took about twenty minutes to drive out to the place that they wanted to show me. Soon we were passing dozens of small parcels of land on both sides. The plots were easy to distinguish one from another because each was at a different stage of cultivation, or was planted with a different crop. Each long, narrow field (about 20m x 500m) was assigned to a different family. As we drove through the fields, Omar pointed out to me which parcels belonged to which families. “This one belongs to Nacho,” he commented, meaning Ignacio del Valle, then serving a sentence of more than 100 years in a maximum security prison.

One of the tactics of the companies that were trying to buy up the land was to get local ejido commissions to dissolve, so that the land ceased to be communal and each farmer owned his own parcel of land. Then the farmers were permitted to sell. Unfortunately, if only some farmers sold, it meant that everyone’s land was useless for farming. You can’t farm a long, narrow parcel of land between two condominium developments. Looking at the plots, I wondered how anyone could subsist on them at all. I asked Virgilio if anyone could live off of their plot entirely. “Oh, no,” he replied, “Everyone has other jobs. My house is across the street from the elementary school, so my family has a small stationary store. Omar’s family has a

small grocery.” Virgilio also did occasional seasonal work on off-shore oil wells in the Gulf of Mexico. Everyone picked up piecemeal work as they could find it. Although no one exclusively farmed, for most people it was the only constant occupation that provided a backdrop to seasonal work or short-lived small businesses.

Past the fields, we parked the car at the bottom of a small, dusty hill. The older man stayed sitting in the car and Omar, Virgilio, and I climbed the hill on foot. Omar brought his machete, perhaps hoping that I was lying about not having a camera. From the top of the hill, there was a complete 360 degree view of the terrain. The view was impressive. Virgilio let me look around for a few minutes before pointing out the important sights. Omar wandered off down the other side of the hill with his machete. First, he oriented my shoulders toward Mexico City to the southwest. I could make out the tops of tall buildings sticking out of a cloud of yellow-brown smog. Atenco was very close to it, but distant enough that the outline of the smog was visible. To the north was Teotihuacan, the site of the ancient city with the enormous pyramids of the sun and the moon, possibly the largest tourist attraction in that part of Mexico. To the south were more pyramids, “That’s where the giant goddess is from,” Virgilio told me, “The one in the Anthropology Museum in Mexico City. When the Spanish came here, this whole place was under water,” he said, “an enormous lake: El Lago Texcoco.”

I noticed a sharp dividing line that ran north and south. To the left of the line, there were green fields and brown dirt. To the right, the soil was red with large patches of white and no crops. “All of this land belongs to the ejido of Atenco.” Virgilio continued, “Those parcels to the left are divided up to families, but all this land to the right is communal land. It still belongs to us, but it isn’t farmed. The land here isn’t very good naturally. It used to be the floor of the lake and so there are all kinds of minerals there. It’s salty land. When they tried to take our land with

the airport decree, they said that this land is useless because it's salty. They said it wasn't productive. But look there," he said, referring to the green and brown land to the left. "That land used to be the same. But our grandfathers plowed it and planted there and fertilized it with manure again and again and again. It's wonderful land that you can plant and is productive. In a generation or two, this land could be productive too." He pointed to a round, black shape in the near distance to the right of the great pyramids. "That's the Caracol. It was a plant that manufactured sodium bicarbonate and other household minerals from the soil that used to be the bed of the lake. Do you see the white patches in the soil on this side? Those are the minerals. The Caracol used to take and purify those minerals. We all used to work there." Virgilio explained that the plant closed after many years of strikes and so was left empty.

Virgilio said that the Caracol was built by a Spaniard who came to Mexico in the 1930s to escape Franco. A large percentage of the people in the communities around Atenco were employed at the Caracol and when the man died, they went on strike against the new management. They were on strike for six years from 1993 to 1999. There was a plantón that looked over the factory so that new workers couldn't be brought in and everything was stopped. It shut down the factory. It hasn't been in operation since. The organizations during these strikes throughout the 1990s built the foundation of what happened in Atenco in 2002, Virgilio told me. "What people don't realize about what we accomplished here with the airport is that it didn't come from nowhere. You can't just build something like we did in a few months. We had years and years of formation in the communist party from the 1970s and 1980s. We had put this education to work in the 1990s at the Caracol. Ignacio del Valle and I had twenty years experience organizing together before we organized against the airport. People think it came from nothing, but we couldn't have done what we did without experience and education."

Months later, while going on the tour with a group of American college students, I stood on the same spot and heard a similar story from another member of the Frente who recounted the story of the Caracol, but emphasized peoples' fear of losing their land. She said that people left their farms to go and work for the Caracol. They thought that they were moving up in the world and becoming part of progress and development. But then conditions changed and they had to go on strike. The factory shut down and they ended up being worse off than they were before. They realized that they couldn't depend on others for their livelihood. "It is because of our experiences with the Caracol that made us appreciate the land and how much it means to us," she said, "other people who have been farmers forever and want to stop farming and move to the city may not appreciate it as much. Maybe they want to try a new life, but we know things aren't better off like that."

Because growing corn, beans, or nopales (an edible cactus) in such a small plot is not very lucrative, in 2009 some ejidatarios had built large, expensive greenhouses on their plots to grow organic vegetables that could be sold for a much higher price. Others were attempting to grow spirulina, an algae with medicinal properties, in shallow trenches. One family, in addition to the spirulina operation, had dug a pit to farm carp that they hoped to serve at a small café with spirulina products and local crafts. These new projects, coupled with the area's continually shifting relationship with industry and agriculture, reveal the complexity of the relationship between people and land in the Atenco region. Land represents economic stability, but the strong connection to land was abandoned and rediscovered (according to some accounts) through experiences with wage labor. Furthermore, even though there is a feeling that stability lies in agriculture and land ownership, ejidatarios struggle with making their plots economically profitable. There is intense local resistance to government plans to 'develop' the area, even in

the form of the proposed ecological park, and yet individual ejidatarios find a lot of excitement and possibility in projects experimenting with new crops and tourism.

In many ways, the struggle over land and development in Atenco follows the model of traditional peasant social movements. Here is a community struggling against industrialization to hold on to an agricultural way of life and retain community traditions and small-town life. However, for over one hundred years the region has already passed through cycles of local industrialization, emigration to the city and the United States, and sending family members for seasonal wage labor in other regions of the country. It is more accurate to describe Atenco as a region trying to build a new socially and economically stable place for itself out of any resources it can. For some people in the region this has meant abandoning agriculture, selling land to developers, and seeking a life somewhere else. For others, it has meant devoting their lives to fighting against corporate and government efforts to profit from their land.

## **2.4 POLITICAL IMAGINARY**

The ritual tour of the landscape ended on the top of this hill, watching a series of four or five large helicopters fly overhead in a dense line. “There goes Obama,” Virgilio said, and explained that the President of the United States had been in Mexico City for the last few days and was probably in one of those helicopters either surveying the countryside or traveling to a different location to fly home. Virgilio and Omar studied the helicopters intently trying to discern their origin and possible mission. They speculated about whether President Obama or the Mexican military might be spying on them, making plans about a new use for Atenco’s land, or simply using the fly-over to intimidate them.

Foreign anthropologists are not the only ones to map fantastical political imaginaries onto the mundane details of everyday life in Atenco. The thought that President Obama might be interested in touring the place, or the military would send half a dozen large military helicopters on a juvenile mission of intimidation seem, at once, fantastically paranoid and entirely possible. It was paranoid to read such dramatic political meaning from a few helicopters, but entirely possible considering the scope of the battles over globalization, corporate capitalism, and international commerce that have played out in the recent history of Atenco. The political struggles surrounding the place and the idea of Atenco are deeply entrenched in dramas of competing political and economic fantasies from a wide variety of perspectives: foreigners like me, filmmakers from Mexico City, transnational activists interested in global insurrection, politicians at the highest level of their national governments, businessmen interested in building a first-world Mexico, and local farmers trying to build a life independent from what they see as the damaging, individualizing, profit-driven morality of corporate capitalism. Each of these perspectives is rooted in overlapping lived experiences of international politics and economic changes, and has been articulated and dramatized through a wide variety of media.

The political imaginary of the Frente is rooted in a long history of local organizing based in struggles of the 1980s and 1990s that crystalized sharply in 2001 when Atenco was chosen as the site for a new international airport for Mexico City. I turn now to this history, and the range of political and moral lenses that created the Frente and set the stage for the political drama that has played out there over the last decade. I argue that people experienced this expropriation through a variety of overlapping moral lenses, including beliefs about the connections between land and cultural heritage, a religious lens informed by Catholicism, and a political lens informed

by Marxist and anarchist social movements. Each of these interpretations casts the decree as symbolic of a deeply moral struggle between right and wrong.



## 2.5 A HISTORY OF MANY FRENTEs

I believe that each one of us who are from the Frente de Pueblos en Defensa de la Tierra, each one is a story, and a different story. A story with a lot of threads [*matices*], with a lot of emotions because what we have lived here as a pueblo is something that wasn't written in our life. We didn't imagine this [would happen]. So I think that each point of view is different. It has to do with the story that each one of us carries. I always, all my life I had participated in the church. I saw there a very pretty rose-colored world. However, when we lived the expropriation, it was a moment to participate and it was like waking up to a real life, a real situation. So how I saw the origin of the movement, I can tell you that we are an original, authentic movement, totally authentic, of the pueblo, where together we learned how to walk. Because of those of us that you see in the Frente, no one, no one, no one had the experience. We didn't know what was going to happen.

- Ana María

The government has done very little for this community. What is built here has been built for the force of the people, of our brothers of the community.

-Cris

As Ana María, a resident of the Atenco region and a member of the Frente, states in the quote above, people came to the Frente with a multitude of experiences and motivations, and articulated their interpretations of the Frente's work through a diversity of lenses. Many of the central figures of the Frente in 2009 had no prior experience with social movements. Others had long histories of being involved in a diversity of local and non-local movements, many of them also referred to as "the Frente". Some of these figures were Ignacio del Valle, Virgilio, and Humberto. Humberto described their history of political organizing as beginning in middle school.

Nacho began in middle school, I think. I also began in middle school. In middle school we began with the teachers that didn't teach well, and then wanted to oppress us. I was able to recuperate land for the middle school and there we built the school. There I did the third year of middle school. ... We did that, but it was the last year that- I did the year there and I left middle school. There I began and then I came here to the pueblo and we started with [the issue] of the lands [*predios*], the rents that they charged a lot for and, well, we lowered them. That's

where we made the Frente de Pueblos- no, the Frente del Valle de Mexico- Regional Texcoco. And then later we made the Frente del Valle de Mexico.

Humberto describes here an incident in which a local middle school was out of date, falling down, and educating at a low level. He was part of a student movement that successfully obtained land for a new school. “Leaving school” here is a euphemism for dropping out, a common life path for men growing up in Atenco in the 1950s and 1960s. After school, Humberto was involved in a string of social movements including two previous “Frentes” in the community.

Similarly, Virgilio cites these previous Frentes as an important history to the Frente de Pueblos en Defensa de la Tierra:

There is already a certain history of organizing in this region through three Frentes that they made before. One was the Frente Popular Regional de Texcoco in the 1980s, and then another one that was born also in this time when the Democratic National Front with Cuatémoc Cardenas and these people. But it is born from the roots that the federal government and the government of Mexico City tried to take water for DF [the Federal District, or Mexico City], from our zone, and make wells to take water to DF. So this Frente grows and converts into the Popular Front of the Valley of Mexico. In the beginning, these movements were completely *apartidistas*, they didn’t participate with any organization or political party. ... To date, there are still people in the Popular Front of the Valley of Mexico, but it separated from the Frente de Pueblos en Defensa de la Tierra when it [the FPDT] was born. So all of this gathered experience of struggle from the 80s, the beginnings of the 1980s, the end of the 1990s, allows the communities to generate this experience of organization. And also, there were people who had participated and that had this experience of organization, also. One of them, Ignacio del Valle, other compañeros also, we began to organize ourselves like that.

For both Virgilio and Humberto, “the Frente” is shorthand not just for the Frente de Pueblos en Defensa de la Tierra, but also in two previous Frentes that had played a large role in regional politics for the last thirty years. The current struggle over land was simply the newest

incarnation of previous fights which were also linked to the extraction of local resources for use in Mexico City.

## **2.6 MYSTICAL, RELIGIOUS, AND POLITICAL LENSES**

Nacho del Valle, Virgilio, Humberto, and others drew on their previous experiences with political organizing in October 2001 when the newly elected President Vicente Fox announced a decree that expropriated all of the lands of Atenco to build a new international airport. The federal government had the right to expropriate the land, but it also had to pay the current owners the amount that the land was worth. They agreed to pay 7 pesos per square meter. That amounted to about 53 US cents per square meter, or a little over \$2,000 per acre. As most of the ejidatarios ‘owned’ less than a hectare, or a little over two acres, the average farmer would receive \$4,000 - \$5,000 for his land. To put these numbers in proportion to what the land might really be worth, three years later, private contractors were offering the equivalent of \$100,000 USD for the same plots<sup>6</sup>.

President Fox, in a November 3<sup>rd</sup> televised interview<sup>7</sup> described the compensations as “winning the lottery” [*les cayó la loteria*] for this population, who by anyone’s standards were not wealthy people. However, for many people in Atenco, \$5,000 seemed like very little money to compensate them for losing a way of life. Many people simply saw the decree as a death sentence. Humberto told me:

The land gives us everything. It is the life of our life. If we leave the land, where will we live? A lot of people died in those days. That is, the elderly people. When they thought that they were going to take their land, they were dying little by little. Without being sick, the next day we would find out that so-and-so from this or that place died. Of depression. It was of depression.

Another woman, who makes her living selling cups of yoghurt in Texcoco and Atenco told me that at one point during the struggle against the airport, she went to the small plot of land she farms with her husband and talked to it.

I went to the parcel one day and I told it, “I’m not going to let them fill you with asphalt. First, they are going to take my life. But I’m going to defend you.

In his comments, Fox reveals a value for the land only in monetary terms. One day the land is nearly worthless, and the next it is worth money that the owners should be overjoyed to receive because they are so cash poor. In their comments, Virgilio and the woman above establish a moral value around the land that cannot be conceived of in terms of monetary value. The connection between land and the people who inhabit and work the land is taken as an elemental bond that if broken, means death for both the people and the land.

The spiritual and mythical bond between people and the land is a cliché of Latin American anthropology that is so pervasive that it has worked its way into racial stereotypes and the exoticism of indigenous peoples. Even so, it continues to be a very real force in peoples’ lives and economic activities. Because it is a cliché, it is also open for appropriation. As Ana Maria pointed out in her tour for the American teenagers, many people in the Atenco area had become deeply imbricated in a wage labor economy, became disillusioned with its instability, and returned to the land as a source of stability and moral connection. A cynical perspective might interpret the invocation of this mystical connection by non-indigenous populations as a shallow or instrumental political strategy. I argue that although the sentiment may be strategically deployed, the lack of continuity with indigenous traditions hardly disqualifies thoroughly modern non-indigenous peoples from using the idea to articulate a deeply felt connection to land and history. Virgilio makes this connection explicit through merging his

thoughts of a mystical connection to land with a patriotic concern for Mexican history and the importance of land in constituting the *pueblo* of Mexico.

For us, the lake [of Texcoco] represents the roots of all of the pueblo of Mexico. In this lake, along what is today Mexico City...are the bases, the foundations [*cimientos*], of all of our culture of our country. And it was our history too, our roots, our identity as a pueblo. So our community would lose all of this: our culture, traditions, customs, way of life, our diversity ... It is not just the fact of a territory, of a piece of land. No. It's a lot of things. There are our ancestors, there are our dead, our history. We can't leave it. It's not so easy for many to understand, but this is the cosmovision that we have from our base, our land, our fatherland [*patria*], and everything that surrounds us. And this is what was defended.

For Virgilio, the decree would mean the end of the pueblo of Atenco. In Spanish, the word "pueblo" refers both to the physical place of the town, but also to the people who live there. The linguistic connection between these two conceptions is a hallmark of Mexican politics that reveals the importance of the connection between land and people. It is impossible to refer to a place without implying the people, and vice versa. To refer to "pueblo" as an abstract concept is similar to the North American idea of "the people", but with the additional idea of the land the people live on. It evokes a romanticized idea of rural Mexico and the earthy, genuine, honest people who live there. Virgilio elaborates on this connection in the Atenco/Texcoco region, which is also tied to the lake of Texcoco, which although greatly diminished in size, plays a role in the myths of pre-Hispanic Mexico.

Community festivals and traditions were another factor that people imagined would bring about the death of the community if the land were expropriated. Ana Maria and I sat on the balcony of the Comisario in 2009 talking about her experience with the Frente on a festival day as parades were going by, playing music and shooting off loud fireworks and cannons, traveling through the streets of Atenco and visiting the other surrounding communities. She is a strikingly

pretty woman in her late 30s who speaks carefully and with a lot of emotion. She is frequently called upon to speak at round tables and political events because of her gift as an emotional and powerful orator.

We simply decided to defend what was ours, and together, very together. So this was our force. That as a pueblo- the characteristic of a person from the pueblo is that there is a social fabric. You know your neighbors. These families are very big because one marries from one pueblo to another and two families unite. And the traditions that go from one place to another, and the blessings run through our pueblos. Each festival marks a social togetherness [convivencia], that forms the fabric... I like that this recording has this sound [referring to the music and fireworks] ... We are used to this sound and this music, to what we are living now. This is my pueblo, the traditions, the music, to run happily like this. For me, this is life. I know that the powerful [people] denigrate all of this. They denigrate and say that we are drunk people. That our children are snot-nosed brats [chamacos]. That our women can be war spoils [botin de guerra]. But fortunately, despite what the media says, and the powerful [people], here we are again. Celebrating, jumping, running, with a lot of happiness. This is the way I want to see my pueblo always ... This is what has fed our life, our heart.

To Ana Maria, the expropriation decree was not simply something that took land as a commodity. As it would do away with the town of Atenco, it would break the connection between the people and the land, and also do away with the life of the town, its history and unique culture. It represented the death of a collective experience of a small town life in Mexico that cannot be replicated elsewhere. The festival she refers to is the festival of San Salvador, and is celebrated on His saints day (San Salvador is a very particular image of Christ) in a way that is particular to Atenco. No other town called San Salvador celebrates it in the same way. The feeling about the expropriation decree was that the expropriation of the pueblo was the expropriation of both the land and the people.

Ana Maria's narrative casts the pueblo of Atenco in a deeply moral drama of good against evil. The pueblo is good and values large families, children, celebrations, music, and togetherness. She characterizes the government as not valuing these things at all. To them, the

festivals that weave together the social fabric of Ana Maria's world characterize them as drunks. The children, who represent the heart of a family, are "snot-nosed brats". Women are not the soul of a home, but a commodity to be raped as the spoils of war. In this moral battle, the government is diametrically opposed to the pueblo, and power and money is on the government's side.

Below, Emilio speaks of a time during dialogues with the government in 2002:

The government, before all of the media, promised to a list of commitments: to make a hospital, to make the schools better, to make the streets better, a lot of things. We have the accords. And the government never complied. The government is the dirtiest [thing] that can exist in life. Power is the most- the most degrading, the most treasonous thing that there can be. They don't work. They don't respect either life or dignity of their people, of their pueblo. They pass over whoever there is to obtain their benefits because they work for the powerful. They give the entrance to transnational companies. ... [Those] that are said to represent the pueblo, [actually] represent the interests of the capitalists. They are at the service of capitalism, they aren't at the service of the pueblo. ... This is part- not just that the struggle of Atenco begins, but this has been [around] for hundreds of years. Since the Spanish arrived to Mexico. Since the US invaded a large part of Mexico, of New Mexico. Power has always been from capitalism, from those who have the money, from those who betray [traicionar] their people, for those who subjugate their people. For this reason they make themselves powerful.

Money, power, and the state are bound together as an evil against which the pueblo must fight. Emilio does not see the current Mexican state as any different than Spanish colonialism, or the US taking more than half of the territory of Mexico in the Mexican-American War. To Emilio, both of these examples illustrate how the immoral force of capitalism works through the state and colonialism to oppress the everyday people of Mexico. People with money and power betray the everyday people to gain more money and power for themselves while doing nothing for 'the people'.

In Ana Maria's and Emilio's narratives, the mystical and generative connection between land, people, and culture is opposed to the corrupting, evil influence of government and transnational capitalism. One represents a wholesome morality of family, meaning, and stability. The other is the corrupting influence of profit motive, power, and disregard for human life. Cris, a school teacher, mother, and grandmother who is actively involved in the Catholic church, articulates this moral struggle through a religious lens.

I've arrived at the conclusion that this is a struggle of good against bad. We don't want the bad. [We want] peace to reign, love to reign, everyone to be well. This is my vision in addition to knowing that God created the world so that we would feed ourselves, and not to exploit one another and get more and more and more money. And maybe we can enjoy it, but not to have ambitions like this. Money, and [to say] 'I go blindly to get this money that I see in front of my eyes, not caring if it is my children, my wife, my- it doesn't matter who it is, I want money.' So the money should be an instrument to be able to get ahead [poder salir adelante], not an objective, much less a god... In the bible it says that God is on the side of justice. When I began to march—in the middle of all the noise, in the middle of all of the slogans—I didn't yell slogans, I said a psalm. There is one that is very pretty that says, "I trust in you, Lord" and this is what I repeated. And there is another that says, "You that knows my just cause, attend to my clamor" [*Tú que conoces lo justo de mi causa, atiende a mi clamor*]. I repeated that one a lot because I didn't know how to yell slogans. I said that if our cause is just, God will be with us and we will triumph.

Emilio, who has some history with union politics and is familiar with the role of revolution in the political history of Latin America, expresses a sentiment very similar to Cris's, but articulates it through references to well-known Latin American revolutionaries instead of biblical passages, and the morality of patriotic sentiment rather than a spiritual struggle based in Catholic morality.

There is a word that many luchadores have said, like Che Guevara, like Zapata, like the students, like many, that says, "It is better to die on your feet than live a hundred years on your knees" [*Mas vale morir de pie, que vivir cien años de rodillas*]. And they have done it. Various people that have been an example of what each Mexican should be. That they are prepared to give their liberty, their life, to risk it all, so that there is justice. So that there is equality in the pueblos.



Ana Maria invokes the same mental image as Emilio, a person living on his or her knees and bent over in subjugation, but instead of connecting it to a history of Latin American revolutionaries, she combines a spiritual struggle of good versus evil with transnational politics of free trade liberalization.

They can take our lives, they can hurt us a lot. But what they can't take from us is truth [la razon]. And that is like a seed that we pass from generation to generation. And I think that this fight is eternal. I think that there will always be people who carry this seed of dignity, of force, of love of the truth, love of the land, love of their rights. ... I think that each human being awakens to their essence when neoliberalism hits so hard, because what we experienced was a blow to our lives, our dignity. And in each one arose the true essence of the dignity, to not lower their head. I have always had a lot of fear, from the day that I put a foot here [in the Comisario Ejidal] to participate, I continue to have the same fear. But I have more fear of living bent over [*agachada*]. To live lowering my head, getting on my knees, accepting everything. So I think in my pueblo and in so many pueblos, like Chiapas, the neoliberalism has touched the essence of every human being. It arises with all of its force, this desire to say, "Respect me. Respect me because I am a human being."

In Ana Maria's conceptualization, capitalism and neoliberalism are almost supernatural forces that act through government against the people. Neoliberalism, capitalism, exploitation, and domination are the greatest evils in the world that good people must fight against in order to save a small seed of love, dignity, and truth. Ana Maria's fears of the dangers of neoliberalism have a well-established precedence in scholarly literature. Aihwa Ong defines the main elements of neoliberalism as a political philosophy as:

(a) a claim that the market is better than the state at distributing public resources and (b) a return to a 'primitive form of individualism: an individualism which is 'competitive,' 'possessive,' and construed often in terms of the doctrine of 'consumer sovereignty'. (Ong 2006: 11, citing Peters 1999)

Ong adds that "it is important to note that neoliberal reasoning is based on both economic (efficiency) and ethical (self-responsibility) claims" (Ong 2006: 11). She argues that

neoliberalism is a form of governmentality that profoundly reconstructs subjects in a way that “continually places in question the political existence of modern human beings” (Ong 2006: 13) In other words, neoliberal economic policies have economic, political, and ethical consequences for individual subjects (Paley 2001, Sawyer 2004, Gustafson 2009).

Giroux argues that neoliberal economic policy has an equally profound effect on society and sociability. Speaking in terms of the effects of neoliberalism on the U.S., he argues that neoliberalism “saps the foundation of social solidarity” and “weakens the bonds of social obligation” (Giroux 2011: 9), effectively creating a crisis in public values and communitarian ethics. This crisis of individual and social ethics is palpable in peoples’ narratives of the expropriation decree. President Fox’s comment that residents had “won the lottery” assumes an idea of a mobile, individualistic, and competitive neoliberal subject who would take the money and get a job elsewhere. Most ejidatarios pushed back against this conception by invoking themselves as subjects with a human dignity that cannot be reduced to economic relations, and as beings with moral relationships to land and each other as a collectivity.

Atenquenses did not respond to the decree by arguing that they were a group with a different cultural sense of moral obligation to one another and the land that the state needed to recognize as distinct (as many indigenous groups have successfully argued). Instead, they expressed disgust, fear, and anger toward the expropriation decree through a variety of hybrid mystical, religious, and political lenses that cannot be reduced to ‘cultural differences’. Each person quoted above uses a unique combination of moral references to make their argument. In protesting the evils of the decree, they do not separate themselves as a special sub-group of Mexicans, or even a special sub-group of human beings. They do not make claims on the state using a framework that invokes citizenship rights as Mexicans, cultural rights as a unique

population, or even human rights. Instead, they argue that they are human beings like people all over the world, and as human beings they hold a variety of moral relationships that the state (any state) has an obligation to recognize.

As Ana Maria states in the quote at the beginning of the chapter, “each one of us who are from the Frente de Pueblos en Defensa de la Tierra, each one is a story, and a different story.” Some interpreted the expropriation decree through a mystical connection between people and land, some through a morality based in Catholic religiosity, and others through a political education based in previous experiences with social movements and the philosophies of famous revolutionaries. Most people merged these lenses into unique combinations. All of these lenses however, cast the expropriation decree in a deeply moral drama of good versus evil that meant much more than losing a little piece of land or the construction of an airport.

## **2.7 THE FRENTE’S TACTICS**

The lofty metaphors and moral interpretations of the decree were all based on the very concrete practicality that everyone in San Salvador Atenco, and many people from thirteen nearby communities, would lose their homes and their farmland in the decree. This fact alone meant that, regardless of the moral lens through which people viewed the expropriation decree, if measures were not taken to counter it, everyone would lose their homes and farmland. This meant that people who had never before taken part in social movements began participating in the Frente as it was forming. For many, like Ana Maria, the struggle for the airport changed the course of their lives dramatically. They never expected to be involved in a social movement and were fearful of participating. Ana Maria admits above that she was afraid to come to the Comisario in the beginning and as she states in the quote at the beginning of the section, she

never imagined that she would become involved in a social movement before the expropriation decree. What does one *do* to fight in the eternal struggle of good against evil? What were the daily actions that people took in this heavily emotional and moral drama?

From the beginning, what Tarrow (2005) would call the Frente's 'repertoire of contention' included blocking highways, retaining officials, physically invading government spaces, and utilizing symbols of peasant agriculture. All of these actions were important for two reasons. First, they were important practices that the Frente developed over time through which they enacted and embodied the moral drama unfolding in their lives. This set of practices moved beyond being part of an instrumental political strategy meant to achieve specific goals. They became part of an ethical *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977, Mahmood 2005) that people came to identify with their new role as *compañeros* [comrades], a term associated with people involved in social movements. In the next chapter, I will examine more deeply the meanings of this term, but first it is necessary to describe the historical development of these practices. Second, they are the practices that deeply impacted their political successes and failures. They were the actions directed to individual politicians with the power to deny or concede to their demands, and through which outsiders (people reading the newspaper and watching the events unfold on the daily news) formed opinions about the Frente and the validity of their demands. Local perceptions that outsiders were judging their actions unfairly became a very important motivating force behind producing documentary films about the movement and so it is very important to account for how members of the Frente describe their own actions.

To Virgilio, Humberto, and others who had been involved in the previous Frentes of the 1980s and 1990s in Atenco, the airport decree represented a return to the familiar work of

political organizing through a new Frente. Virgilio describes the actions that quickly began to develop as soon as it was made clear that the land would be expropriated.

The idea of beginning to mobilize was based according to each community. It was decided to form representative commissions from each [of the 13 affected] communit[ies] to represent themselves in one organization. Each community, along their Comisariados Ejidales, their local authorities, went along unifying with this union of pueblos. ... So they begin to organize too, and the assembly decides to name commissions apart from the Comisaria Ejidal. It decides to form commissions alongside the Comisariado to deal with this problem. And they begin to make accords of defense and mobilization. ... And so begins what social struggle is: [*empieza lo que es la lucha*] to confront all of this, the defense of the land, promote legal action [*amparos*], begin to make mobilizations against the expropriation decree, go to all of the media to distribute [*difundir*] news about the problem, the meetings, the visits to courtrooms to follow judicial processes, but also supported by mobilization of the pueblo.

The Frente de Pueblos en Defensa de la Tierra organized itself as a parallel structure to the Comisaria Ejidal, remaining separate, but following its organizational structure with representatives from each community. It formed commissions, sub-committees of volunteers, to work on separate projects involving the media, organizing meetings and political events, and following through on judicial actions. Even though there were legal processes challenging the decree, the most publically visible front of activism of the Frente, and the experiences that most people associated with their participation, involved using the presence of large numbers of people to force government officials and the private land developers to communicate with them.

Officially, the federal and state governments had some sort of dialogue with local government officials regarding the expropriation, but the vast majority of people found out about the expropriation through the news media and local political demonstrations. There were not open meetings to discuss the expropriation, present people with alternatives, or even try and reassure them with promises of compensation. Opening lines of dialogue with government officials in order to get information about the airport project and how their lives would be

affected was a top priority. They sought to open this dialogue through presenting themselves physically in public spaces where they knew public officials would be.

In 2009, Humberto recalled to me with remarkable detail the specific actions and confrontations that drove the beginnings of the movement. The quote below is long, but a very good summary of the key moments and confrontations that defined the Frente in 2001. Although his narrative is a confusion of dates and places and tactics, there are several important themes that are very important to highlight. First, Humberto speaks of the expropriation decree as “expropriating us”, not merely expropriating the land. Humberto’s simple turn of phrase (which is a very common way to refer to the expropriation of land) is a short hand that illustrates the connection between land and people discussed in the previous section. His words reveal the high stakes that people believed were at play and the extents that people were willing to go to in order to keep their land. Most people were truly willing to be killed in confrontations with the police or spend the rest of their lives in prison rather than “be expropriated”. Even though the tone of his narration is jovial (he laughs throughout and is pleased with the story), his language reveals the urgency, emotion, and drama of his experience.

Second, even though Humberto is speaking pragmatically about his interactions with the government, it is clear in his language that the state is something that is completely disconnected from him. He refers to “them” and “their people,” echoing the division that Ana Maria and Emilio articulate above between ‘pueblo’ and ‘government’. In Humberto’s story, this abstraction is manifested in very concrete ways through the physical inaccessibility of the Senate and House of Representative buildings. The same is true for the President of the country and the governor of the state. The degree of the inaccessibility to government process is apparent even while physically in the buildings of government. In a room full of congressmen, “there was no

one to talk to, no one to receive us.” There is no forum in which they could have a dialogue with the government. Instead, they could simply deliver a message (“You are a bunch of Santa Anas”) and leave.

Third, the only engagement with the state apparent in Humberto’s narrative is with the police. This is important because in peoples’ experiences and in the documentary films made about the Frente, the police become a primary means of visually representing the state. Humberto describes that instead of sending someone to speak with them, the president and the governor sent *granaderos*, a local word that refers to riot police, also referred to as ‘public force’ [*fuerza pública*]. They are special forces which can exist on the local, state, or federal level who wear black plastic body armor, clear plastic face shields, and carry long, clear plastic body shields. They are officially not allowed to carry guns. Instead, they carry billy clubs and tear gas. The federal granaderos, the PFP (Policia Federal Preventativa, or Preventative Federal Police) often appear with tanks specially designed for crowd control that are topped with water cannons. In Humberto’s narrative, the state responds to a call for dialogue by sending granaderos. He interprets the granaderos as an unnecessary escalation of violence on the part of the state. This point (who took the first step in the escalation of violence) will become crucial in my discussion of the place of violence in subsequent chapters.

Humberto’s narrative begins after he has told me about the various other local Frentes that he helped to create over the past decades, and how he and a few others began organizing against the decree as soon as rumors began to develop that Atenco would be the chosen site of the new airport.

So when the expropriation decree came, we already had our people. That is when we got harder [*nos penemos mas duros*] and we closed the highway. That was October 22, 2001. [The same day as the official announcement of the decree.] We

closed it about eight hours. They sent the granaderos [riot police], they sent us everything and we were prepared to fight with them because if they expropriated us [*nos expropean*] and no one in the government came to explain to us why they were expropriating us- ... But there was a dialogue with the government. One of their flunkies [*achichinklas*] - because the real ones didn't even come - one of their flunkies came and we talked and we said that the only thing that we wanted is that they retreat their forces, the public force. "We are going to unblock the highway, but if you don't take out the police, we won't unblock it. And come what may, we won't unblock it." So they took out the police and we unblocked [the highway]. ...

So we began to do marches. We started to march. We went to the offices [*dependencias*] [asking] that they receive us ... and arrive at an agreement, a clean agreement. But this clean agreement never came. All of the offices that we went to never opened [their doors] to us. If we entered, we entered by force. For this reason, we armed ourselves with the machete. Of course, the machete is a work tool also. But a lot of places there in Mexico, or that we went in marches, didn't let us enter. We had to break the barrier [*valla*] to enter.

For this reason - you can see it in the videos - November 14, they set a very large operation against us. On the trajectory that we were going in the march, [they set the operation] to redirect us to another street. So we decided to disobey. We disobeyed the redirection. But when we got to the reference point, the operation of granaderos was already there and they didn't let us pass. That was when- that was the first battle that we had in Mexico. We caught a beating [*Nos agarramos una trompiza*]. This finger damaged [he shows me his damaged finger from the fight.] But even so, we didn't say anything and we broke the barrier and we entered the zocalo. ...

We went to the House of Representatives and no representative came out. For all of the [political] parties that there are and when they come for their elections, they even come looking for people in their houses. They walk around knocking on people's doors [*los andan tocando a uno*] to receive them and support them in the elections at election time. But when we have this problem and we went to look for them, no party received us. We entered by force there in San Lazaro in the House of Representatives. We entered and we just entered to tell them that they were a bunch of Santa Anas, that they had sold the country. And we left soon because it didn't make sense without anyone to talk to, no one to receive us. We went to the Senate and, just the same, no one received us. No one received us. We went to the Office of Communications. Neither. No one. We went to Los Pinos [the equivalent of the White House] and no one received us. We sent an invitation to [President] Fox to have a debate there in Chapultepec, there in the Anthropology Museum, and he didn't want to come. To debate the problem of Atenco with us, and he didn't want to come. He never received [us]. But they did send us granaderos. They sent us a lot of things. We went to Toluca [the state



capital] – in those days Montiel was governor of the state of Mexico – and we went to Toluca and they never received us.

There were a lot of protests. A lot. There was a lot of tension. Daily. Daily we went to Mexico. We saw around here [police] patrols from the state of Mexico and we detained them. We said to them, “Leave. We don’t want to see you here. Because the next time, we will detain you for real.”

We detained government officials too. When the Bulgarian company came - he is the one that supposedly won the work of the airport ... When he came to do the analysis of the pueblo and the terrain, we found him and we told him, “We don’t want you to work here because these are our lands. The government has never come to talk with us [about this] so there is no negotiation and there is no permission for you to work here. Leave please, and don’t come back.” ... We detained their machinery. We detained their machinery and we detained their workers and we asked the workers who their boss was. They told us, and we said, “Call him on the telephone and tell him to come here to get you. Because you aren’t going to leave here. He should come and you can go.” And he came. The Bulgarian came, and that is when we detained him. ... Three days we had him retained, only on the condition that they show us the plans. Because they never showed us the plans for the airport they were going to build. That they show us the plans!

The extent to which the Frente goes in order to establish communication with the government illustrates the extent of the physical and symbolic barriers between the Frente and state and federal governments. Humberto mentions that the only contact they have with their government representatives is during an election. Attempts to communicate with elected officials were blocked at every turn. The only dialogue that the Frente is able to achieve is in situations in which the Frente gains physical control of space or people important to commerce or the government. Closing the highway receives an immediate response because it blocks commerce and immediately involves a large number of people, including news media. They can also “retain” people within their reach in order to force dialogue with those they cannot reach. They gain access to the Bulgarian contractor through retaining his employees, and they gain access to the government plans for the region by retaining the contractor. They send messages to the state

government through retaining police officers. It is important to note that these retentions opened lines of constructive, peaceful dialogue with various levels of government and created positive outcomes for the Frente.

The third aspect of Humberto's narrative that I would like to stress is the daily nature of the struggle during the period from October 22, 2001 until the decree was abrogated in July 2002. Humberto says, "There was a lot of tension. Daily. Daily we went to Mexico." Virtually all other aspects of life stopped, or at least took a back seat, to activity in the movement. The constant, daily nature of the Frente's organizational work became very important to how people began to see themselves as political subjects and citizens of Atenco and Mexico. This is a subject I will return to in detail in the next chapter.

There are two other significant pieces of Atenco's history with the airport struggle that Humberto does not talk about in this portion of his story. The first is an incident in July 2002 in which Ignacio del Valle and a few other visible members of the Frente were arrested in a political march. Members of the Frente went to regional government offices and retained a number of officials whom they housed in the municipal auditorium in the center of Atenco for several days demanding that prisoners be released. People erected barricades at the entrances of Atenco as police and armed forces surrounded the municipality, threatening to enter and take back the government officials by force. According to a reporter from *La Jornada* who was following the Atenco story (and continued to follow it well into 2009), this stand-off very nearly ended in multiple deaths. According to several first-person accounts, a middle-aged woman positioned herself at a gas station at the edge of town and threatened—with a lighter in one hand and a gas nozzle in the other—to blow up herself, the town, and the armed forces to prevent them taking the town. According to members of the Frente stationed at the municipal auditorium, they

were also prepared to kill the retained officials. Fortunately, the state released the prisoners (Nacho del Valle was released last), causing the Frente to release their retained officials and the crisis was averted.

The second important part of the history is that by the time the expropriation decree was abrogated, the vast majority of members of the Frente were engaged in some form of criminal prosecution. This meant that a significant percentage of the population of residents from Atenco and the surrounding communities were facing small criminal charges and had to appear in court on a regular basis. So many people were facing charges that the paperwork to process them overwhelmed regional bureaucratic offices and the governor had to issue a blanket amnesty. However, the dual experiences of frequently engaging in face-to-face confrontations with police in political marches and having to navigate the complex and often obscure pathways of the Mexican legal justice system permanently altered many people's opinions of the utility and efficacy of legal pathways, and the legitimacy of laws in general. This deep mistrust of government and legal pathways significantly altered how Atenco's political system functioned in years to come.

The vast majority of people I spoke with in the Frente told me that the federal government abrogated the expropriation decree because of political marches, demonstrations, media attention, and support from the general public. However, as the Frente marched, closed highways, and retained government officials, there were also legal battles being carried out. The first action was attempting to get an *amparo*, a legal action that would have stopped the expropriation under the grounds that it violated the rights of the ejidatarios. The second action was a case arguing that the expropriation decree violated the rights of the local government, or represented a 'constitutional conflict' [*controversia constitucional*] between the federal and local

governments. Ramón, a local doctor who went to medical school in Mexico City and returned to Atenco to set up his family practice, told me how important he thought these legal battles to be.

The federal government knew that it was losing the legal battle on two fronts: with the appeal [*aparo*], on which the right was on our side, and with the constitutional conflict. Alongside the force of the people doing the [social] movements. All of this made the force. But definitely, the head of the spear are the movements. ... It wasn't just one thing. It was various things that acted together. ... I feel, I think, that the most honorable and decorous exit for a government is to say, "I abrogate the decree because I knew that here the legal battle is being lost." Legally they were losing. They didn't have weapons anymore to support their right because we demonstrated that they didn't have the legal right. Because all legal processes have a limited time, it seems there that the limited time that the court had to rule on the controversy was about to expire. This day, the court had to give a resolution. And there was every indication to show that this resolution was favorable to us, the inhabitants of Atenco. It would have been horrible for a local government to win a court case against the federal government. It would have been shameful. ... and so the other recourse that federal government had, the honorable recourse that they had, was to take down the decree. Because over here, they were losing, and they were going to say in the court case that we were right. I feel that this is what made the government advance and abrogate the decree. Because they were going to lose [the legal cases].

Whatever the federal government's reasoning for abrogating the decree, in July 2002, nine months after President Vicente Fox announced the expropriation decree, he abrogated it. The Frente de Pueblos en Defensa de la Tierra had been successful.

Most of the people involved in the Frente went back to their normal lives. They won back their land, the decree was abrogated, and there was no more reason to be involved in the movement. However, even as people returned to their daily lives, the experiences of the airport struggle stayed with them. The airport struggle was an incredibly strong and transformative experience for most in the area, whether or not they were actively involved in the Frente. A small nucleus who were central to the movement continued to be very politically active and, rather than disbanding, the Frente retained a significant political influence in the community. The

Frente frequently became intermediaries for people when dealing with local governments. The Frente also continued to travel and support other social movements in other parts of the country.

## **2.8 CONCLUSION**

In this chapter, I introduced Atenco as a place and narrated the recent history of the Frente as much as possible in the words of its members. I argued that people experienced the expropriation as a deeply moral struggle between right and wrong. I also illustrated the development of some of the political strategies and concrete daily practices that the Frente used to become forceful actors in this moral struggle. I argued throughout that Atenquenses did not use arguments based on citizenship rights, human rights, or rights as a distinct ethnic group to substantiate claims to their land and integrity as a community. Instead, Atenquenses argued that they are human beings like people all over the world, and as human beings they hold a variety of moral relationships that the state has an obligation to recognize. In other words, instead of using a framework that would grant them rights (a legal concept) as a particular kind of (political, economic, or ethnic) subject, they used a framework conceiving of humans as universally moral and social beings for whom competitive, individualistic economic self-interest is damaging, and for whom an ethical, selfless commitment to collectivity is beneficial. In other words, Atenquenses deserve to keep their land, not because they have rights as Mexican citizens or a unique religious or ethnic group, but because they are human beings. This conceptualization seems to draw on a human rights framework in its universality, but abandons the concept of rights tied to an atomized individual with a bodily integrity that holds within it a capacity for happiness and self-fulfillment separate from a collectivity or a network of social and moral relationships. Instead, it reveals a profound commitment to collectivity and sociability, not as a

cultural trait specific to Atenco, but as a universal human value. This humanistic approach allowed the Frente to articulate with a diversity of social movements throughout Mexico and the world, while drawing pride and strength from a variety of historical, political, and religious particularities.

I argue in subsequent chapters that the cultivation of self and the production of dramatic narratives is critical to understanding the multiple roles of documentary filmmaking and distribution in the political work of the Frente. I suggested in this chapter that these dramatic interpretations and ethical practices formed the basis of a new identifier or role for members of the Frente. I turn now to a discussion of how this new role, that I call being a *compañero*, was produced and honed through creative practices, including the production of documentary films.

### CHAPTER 3: CULTURAL PRODUCTION AND THE SELF

Participation gives you an incredible degree of consciousness. That surprises you. You begin to leave [behind] egoism and personal protagonisms and everything goes into the function of the collectivity and for the collectivity.

-Beto, a filmmaker from Atenco

I became interested in Atenco for the same reasons as many filmmakers. I was interested in how the movement managed to succeed and mobilize so many people. I asked these questions of everyone I met in Atenco, and they were questions everyone had answered numerous times before in interviews with students and reporters. The answers were simple. Why was such a large percentage of the population involved in the Frente? Because they had no other choice; it was fight the decree or perish. How did they manage to succeed when so many before them had failed? Because they never compromised their terms, because truth was on their side, because they were unified, because they were willing to die.

These answers were initially dissatisfying because they seemed formulaic and superficial. My job appeared to be to dig beneath the surface of these platitudes and discover the 'real' causality of the movement and how media fit into this causality. What I came to realize however, is that the battle over the airport was the veneer of a much deeper struggle over frustrations and desires surrounding a neoliberal governmentality that constructs its subjects and consumers as autonomous, profit-seeking, self-interested individuals. The answers I was hearing were not grandiose because they were empty platitudes, but because they were indicative of a deeply felt moral struggle over conceptions of what makes a human being. According to President Fox's conception, Atenguenses would be glad to get some money for their homes and would think nothing of leaving Atenco forever to seek their individual fortunes elsewhere. Instead, people preferred to fight and die rather than leave Atenco. The Frente won, people told me, not because

of laws, political marches, and direct actions, but because of a collective deep moral integrity of selfless mutual support and commitment.

In the last chapter, I argued that Atenguenses used a framework that they are human beings like people all over the world: social beings embedded in a moral economy. This conceptualization entails a profound commitment to collectivity and sociability, not as a cultural trait specific to Atenco, but as a universal human value. In this chapter, I show how this argument entails a conception of human beings for whom competitive, individualistic economic self-interest (connected to neoliberal governmentality) is damaging, and for whom an ethical, selfless commitment to collectivity is beneficial. I argue that participants cultivated and honed this commitment to collectivity through their participation in the Frente. I call this commitment, as do people in Atenco, being a *compañero* or a *compañera*. In this chapter, I show how being a *compañero/a* is a sense of self that is produced as an ethical disposition through political practice. I argue that *compañerismo* is produced in a positive, creative way through practice and is also policed socially through conceptions of *protagonismo* [protagonism]. I use three examples of filmmakers to show how *compañerismo* and *protagonismo* have played out in the lives and political practices of individual filmmakers. Filmmaking is a crucial site to examine these processes because in the case of the Frente, it lies at the intersection between collective transformation through cultural production (the creation of material, creative arts) and transformation of self through practice. Examining filmmaking allows us bring together theories of how social movements work to transform society, with theories of how media work. Even so, filmmaking as a practice of cultivating *compañerismo* is also deeply flawed. Precisely because of its contradictions however, it is a productive site to examine the production of *compañerismo*.



### 3.1 ETHICAL DISPOSITION AND THE SELF

Anthropologists in recent years have theorized the commitment to collectivity I described in the last chapter in terms of inadequate conceptions of citizenship. Sian Lazar (2008) argues that neoliberal changes in Bolivia presuppose an individualized citizenship that does not align with how people in El Alto experience themselves politically. She sought to better understand “how individualized, liberal understandings of political action interact with collectivist traditions” (2008:3). She suggests that these experiences with collectivist citizenship will be a factor in impeding “global neoliberal governmentality projects” (2008:24) and implies that collectivism is a form of resistance because it retains a sense of self that refuses to be individualized according to a neoliberal sense of governmentality.

James Holston (2008) theorizes a similar form of contestatory citizenship in the context of Brazil, where citizen experiences of political action in the 1970s and 1980s resulted in a redefinition of citizenship in their 1988 constitution. While Lazar emphasizes experience and the potential for resistance, Holston argues that the tensions between what he calls the “entrenched citizenship” of inequality and the practice-based, substantive “insurgent citizenship” of the peripheries have contributed to instability and violence in the city. Much like Lazar’s conception of collective citizenship, Holston argues that insurgent citizenship arises out of peoples’ shared experiences of working together in social movements.

Lazar and Holston’s arguments both point toward an important collective aspect to peoples’ experiences as political subjects that is not accounted for in either analytical frameworks of citizenship or neoliberal governing strategies. However, neither study moves beyond noting how experiences of citizenship differ from (and perhaps resist) official characterizations, and become legitimated (or not) through legal pathways. This oversight raises

the question: if people created a powerful political organization that enabled and cultivated an important collective sense of self that state citizenship does not allow, why would they be satisfied with winning state citizenship rights? These movements may have been content to ‘settle’ for political gains, but it is also clear from these scholars’ work that the experience and political power of these movements overflowed and moved beyond citizenship rights.

One approach to accounting for the Frente’s important commitment to collectivity would be to trace its lineage to historical particularities of the region; connections to an indigenous past and traditions, for example, or the long history of Marxist, anarchist, and union organizing in the region. There is a lot of value in these genealogical approaches. However, pinpointing a specific historic root does not account for the survival of collectivism through adversity, or the experience many people had (expressed in Beto’s quote above) that the sense of collectivity and consciousness arose out of the movement rather than preceded it. I find it much more compelling to ask how and why an ethical disposition – or *habitus* – that values collectivity has been produced and reproduced in Atenco. In this chapter, I argue that experiences of collective action are a creative force of self-determination (including a collective self) that overflows and operates outside legal and institutional parameters. In other words, it is not simply that there *is* a collective sense of self as Lazar argues, it is that purposefully cultivating a collective sense of self is a powerful ethical and political practice of individual and social transformation.

Cultivating a sense of ‘we’, regardless of what this collective sense of self attaches itself to, is an important part of how social movements bring about cultural and social change. The New Social Movements of the twentieth century called into being collective senses of self that were based on race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and religion among other identifications (Melucci 1989, Taylor & Whittier 1992, Laraña et al 1994). They sought to legitimize these

categories as deserving of equal rights under the law. However, the legal gains won in New Social Movements were often unsatisfactory. Once indigenous/queer/black/female people were recognized as a legitimate rights-bearing category by the state, it appeared as if the battle had been won, but discrimination, racism, sexism, and disenfranchisement lived on in social and cultural milieus (see Jackson 2008, for example). Furthermore, once recognized by the state, the category could be institutionalized, reified, and regulated in constricting, rather than liberating, ways. In short, legality revealed itself to be superficial. The more profound transformation for disenfranchised groups is an elusive, indefinable quality of social and cultural change and valuation that is very difficult to see or measure and is very poorly understood.

Cultural production (production of media and the arts) is embedded in processes of cultural, social, and political transformation that move beyond instrumental legal and institutional frameworks, and can help to understand this indefinable quality. Anthropologists have argued that media production in indigenous communities throughout the world entails a process of what Faye Ginsburg has called “collective self-production” (1997: 120). This literature (to which I will return in greater depth in Chapter 6) converses with literature interested in discourse and textual analysis, but places emphasis on the social relations of media production as a site for the production of self and identity. Building from Bourdieu’s (1993) work on cultural production as a field for social reproduction, this literature is concerned with examining cultural production as a field for social *transformation*.

Ginsburg’s invocation of “self production” echoes anthropological work that examines how people cultivate or hone more pious or virtuous selves through religious practice (Asad 1993, Csordas 1997, Lester 2005). Mahmood (2005) shows how women in the mosque movement in Cairo transform themselves into more pious subjects through consciously

cultivating a pious *habitus* that results in a more pious ethical disposition. She argues that the action of praying precedes the ethical disposition; they do not pray because they are pious, they become pious subjects through praying. She distinguishes her conception of *habitus* from Bourdieu's (1977) conception:

Even though Bourdieu draws upon the Aristotelian tradition in retaining the sense that *habitus*, once acquired, is a durable aspect of one's disposition, he leaves aside the pedagogical aspect of the Aristotelian notion as well as the context of ethics within which the notion of *habitus* was formulated. ... In contrast, the Aristotelian notion of *habitus* forces us to problematize how specific kinds of bodily practice come to articulate different conceptions of the ethical subject, and how bodily form does not simply express the social structure but also endows the self with particular capacities through which the subject comes to enact the world. (Mahmood 2005: 139)

Bourdieu uses *habitus* to explain how and why people at a certain intersection of class and ethnicity (apart from their individual desires or conscious choices) come to have similar dispositions. In contrast, Mahmood uses the concept to show how one can consciously and purposefully cultivate an ethical disposition *apart* from specific intersections of class, ethnicity, and gender. Using Bourdieu's conception of *habitus*, we might better understand how intersections of history, race, religion, gender, and class created dispositions in Atenco that made them more likely to resist the airport decree rather than accept it. However, Mahmood's conception allows us to understand how the daily practice of being involved in the movement and producing documentary films transformed concepts of self for members of the Frente and its allies. It allows us to understand how a person like Beto came into the movement to save his land and through participation in the Frente experienced a transformation in himself and began to "leave behind personal protagonisms".

Mahmood's conception of ethical disposition and *habitus* is largely an individual process of transformation that has social and political consequences. Ginsburg's use of "collective

selves” seems to indicate a conception of self that does not reside in the individual, but exists collectively and socially. Markus & Kitayama call this the “interdependent self,” a sense of being that is “not as separate from the social context and [is] less differentiated from others” (1991: 227). Throop (2009) terms this idea the “diffuse self” that is “marked in many ethnographies of non-Western cultures by loose boundaries between self and other” (Throop 2009: 9). Both of these conceptions locate ‘the self’ not in the individual, but in relationships with others.

In terms of social movements, the concept of a relational or interdependent self can help us understand hegemonic processes through which certain kinds of people are marginalized and devalued as human beings, and the work of social movements that struggle to re-define and re-value marginalized people. This transformation is a complex struggle of meaning and value that happens not only between social movements and the larger society, but within movements themselves. In order to convince the wider world of the worth of a group of people, it must also convince itself of its own worth. The process might be seen as ‘consciousness raising’ (as second wave feminism defined its work), or reclaiming damaging terms such as ‘queer’, ‘black’, or even ‘slut’. The struggle for meaning in society entails an internal struggle, both within individual people and small collectivities, as well as external struggles with national and international populations. These struggles do not occur consecutively (first individual, then in the movement, and then nationally), but simultaneously as a process of negotiation, discovery, and wrong turns.

The struggle over meaning and valuation also happens through continual practice and human relationships, not exclusively through discourse. Seeing these practices in terms of interdependent selves (rather than individual selves) also helps us understand ‘practice’ as something that happens on a collective, social basis as well as on an individual basis. The

individual is important in this dialogical process of negotiation and practice, but is best seen as an arbitrary level of analysis. The individual is no more or less important than other social levels, ranging from the relationship between two people, to the imagined community of a nation (Anderson 1983). The production and transformation of self (especially a collective, relational, or interdependent self) is a social process that is located inside and between all of these scales<sup>8</sup>.

The intersection between cultural production (the production of electronic media, theater, and material visual arts) and self production (a more abstract production of ethical disposition) is a crucial intersection for examining how social movements help to bring about elusive social and cultural changes that exist outside the grasp of legal and institutional frameworks. Examining this intersection in terms of self-production rather than identity-production helps to avoid some of the pitfalls of New Social Movement theories that sometimes tended to flatten and over-determine identity categories (see Taylor and Whittier's 1991 definition of collective identity, for example). Self-production also allows for the incorporation of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991) into theories of social movement senses of collectivity. A conception of 'self' connotes a degree of complexity and multiplicity that 'identity' has difficulty capturing.

This is not just an analytical and theoretical distinction, but a practical development based on activists' experiences. For example, there is no one identity (or identification) that can be redefined or reclaimed in the context of Atenco. The sense of self that is being worked through and built up in Atenco is not defined by race, gender, class, or sexuality, even though all of these categories are relevant to some individuals. The complex intersections of these categories mean that they are all relevant without the same category being relevant to everyone in the Frente and serving at a primary point of articulation (Hall 1996). The collective sense of self in Atenco is an elusive non-category in an era of elusive non-discrimination that has to do with being subject to

(and subjects of) a host of global political and economic forces: the neoliberal economic policies of a federal government weakened by corporate capitalism and drug trafficking, the attractions of consuming the products of these same corporations and drug traffickers, the constricting immigration and drug policies of the United States, the ‘development’ projects and incentives of the World Bank, and the interventions of international non-governmental organizations (to name only a few). What does it mean to be a subject of these institutions that exist seemingly without boundaries, and ‘discriminate’ in seemingly invisible ways?

This lack of definition entails an analytical difficulty of what name one gives to the attempt to cultivate a sense of (collective) self that is defined by an attempt to exist outside of these institutions and global forces? I bring these concepts together under the term ‘compañero/a,’ or ‘compa,’ because this is a designation that locally refers to someone who is a member of the Frente or other social movements (throughout Mexico and the world). In Atenco, and throughout Latin America, the word ‘compañero’ is a very common way to refer to members of social movements. Literally meaning ‘one who accompanies,’ it might be seen as a Spanish equivalent to ‘comrade’ (although the word ‘camarada’ also exists in Spanish as a distinct term), but it is not exclusively used in the political context. For instance, one may refer to one’s significant other as ‘compañero’ in much the same way that one might use the word ‘partner’ in the United States. It can also refer to a classmate (compañero/a de clase) or a co-worker or colleague. When used to indicate a large group of people without context however, it usually implies a group of people who are involved with social movements. For example, political speeches virtually always begin by addressing the crowd as ‘compañeros y compañeras’. When speaking in the third person about people from the Frente, La Otra Campaña, or from the autonomous communities in Chiapas, people most often refer to ‘los compañeros,’ or a shortened

version of the word only ever used in the context of social movements: ‘compa’. As an outsider, if you are introduced to others in the movement as ‘una compa’, it is understood that you are part of a social movement (as opposed, for instance, to ‘una amiga’, which might mean you are friendly, but not in-the-know). It can also be used as a title to refer to someone in the third person. Instead of referring to someone as ‘la señora de Atenco’ [the lady from Atenco] while speaking to or about people in the Frente, it is much more common to say ‘la compañera de Atenco’, regardless of her age or marital status.

The shortened version, ‘compa’ has the advantage of being gender inclusive. Although technically in Spanish the masculine version ‘compañeros’ includes both men and women, the heightened attention to inclusiveness and political sensitivity of social movements means that speakers often purposefully include the feminine form (much like in English) to be more politically correct. Doing away with the gendered ending of the word altogether has the advantage of being shorter and more inclusive.

I now turn toward a more ethnographic description of how *compañerismo* is cultivated and policed first in the wider context of the Frente, and then through the political practice of filmmaking.

### **3.2 COMPAS Y PROTAGONISTAS**

Many women were integrated. [It was] very beautiful. ... There arose a kind of energy. I don't know. It is one of those moments that I felt the most sure/safe [*segura*] in my life. I felt a lot of positive energy. The people were sad, but we also had a lot of force.

-Odette

One afternoon in 2009, I conducted an interview in my room with someone from the Frente and afterward we went next door to Maria's kitchen to chat and have a cup of coffee. The



three of us chatted for over an hour, the two of them reminiscing about the good old days of the Frente seven years earlier. When our guest left and the two of us were alone again, Maria continued to talk about the movement. She looked back on those days fondly, saying that they were some of the best times of her life. Nacho used to come here all the time, she said, he used to come here and have a coffee and we would talk and he would take a nap in that chair, right there. She sighed, indicating a large patio chair right outside the kitchen door. Oh yes, she said, they were always together, going to marches and events. She never wanted to be near the front of the marches, but often she was pushed to the front because she was singing and had her machete, and they brought her up there. She said this with a twinkle in her eye that told me there was something to being in the front of the march that appealed to her. She wasn't afraid to be up there, she said, but then afterwards, she would come out in the newspaper images or on the news and people would talk about it. She didn't like that, and it was clear that her husband didn't like it either. She tried to stay back in the crowd, but for some reason, she most always found herself in the front. Except when there were confrontations on the highway and the retentions. She wasn't there at all and never had an arrest warrant against her. She seemed proud of this. I've never done anything wrong, she told me. She has marched at the front of the demonstrations, but that is not illegal. Everyone can march. The reservations and the nervousness with which she says it, she told me, is because it doesn't matter if marching is legal or illegal. Those at the front of the line are targeted by the government for being leaders and are punished whether or not they did anything illegal. She tries to have the law on her side, she said, but the reality is that only the governors and big businesses have the constitution on their side. When the law is not on their side, she said, it just doesn't apply.

Just as Odette expresses in the quote above, the battle over the airport was a beautiful and powerful experience for Maria. Both women were moved by positive emotions of companionship and mutual support that the movement provided. This sense of unity was powerful not just because of the political gains that the movement achieved. Odette told me stories about two women who were diagnosed with cancer when they began participating in the movement. According to her, the continuous exercise they got from walking in political marches—being outside in the sunshine every day, and the benefits of laughter and togetherness of the movement—cured their cancer. Several women, including Maria and Odette, told me stories of women who were so empowered by their experiences in the Frente that they left abusive husbands. These stories highlight the intense positive emotions and feelings of togetherness and empowerment that framed these women’s political participation. This sense of *communitas* was an important and defining experience of their involvement with the Frente, and is comparable to Lazar’s (2008) sense of collective self in Bolivian social movements.

Equally important was the experience, most evident in Maria’s narrative, of the tension between being a member of the movement and the fear and uncertainty of being a political subject of the state. Maria knows that as a citizen she has a right to march and demonstrate, but this right is meaningless because under her understanding, the law can only be used to hurt her, never to protect her. The Frente, on the other hand, is the source of security, support, and empowerment. This support and security only operates however, as long as she can remain an anonymous member of a crowd. There is danger as soon as she steps to the front, is captured as an individual by cameras, and possibly identified as a ‘leader’.

Visibility, individuality, and collectivity come together in unique combinations in Maria’s sense of security in the movement, and simultaneous vulnerability as a citizen. There is

safety and security in collective visibility, vulnerability and anxiety in individual visibility. She enjoys the empowerment and recognition of marching at the front of the crowd, but is simultaneously fearful of the consequences.

There is a deeply gendered aspect to why she might be pushed to the front of the crowd, as well as how she so easily admits to being afraid of the consequences. Men were much less likely to admit to me of being afraid of government retaliation for their participation. In my experience attending dozens of the Frente's political events throughout 2008 and 2009, key organizers of the Frente (men and women) often encouraged women, older people, and children to be at the front of demonstrations, and encouraged them to speak at microphones, on stage, and in front of television cameras. Generally occupying the physical margins of any political event myself, men and women alike often tried to push me toward the front or the center. Members thought that the visible faces of the Frente should change often and reveal the diversity of people involved in the movement. Women were encouraged to the front because they often (but not always) hung back. Maria's uneasiness surrounding leadership is gendered, but it also reveals a morality of selflessness and collectivity that ideally accompanies being a *compa* for both men and women. In other words, Nacho pushing her forward both encouraged her to be more visible and took some attention away from himself.

Maria's narrative also reveals that the cultivation of her self as a *compañera* in the Frente is formed by negative policing practices as well as by positive creative processes. Maria's fears and trepidations of being seen as a leader reveal a process of internal policing that is encouraged by gossip and face-to-face confrontation in the movement. The Mexican state also literally polices protagonism through violently punishing those who stand out in the movement. I use the concept of 'protagonism' that Beto uses in the quote at the beginning of the chapter (and that

many other members of the Frente also use) as a foil for understanding how being a compa is policed as an ethical disposition.

Noting that Maria, the Frente, and the Mexican state collude to produce *compañerismo* as an ethical disposition does not mean that the Frente and the state have a similar ideological project of subject formation in mind. The concern of the *compañeros* is to stay alive and unharmed, transform their world, and have a better life for themselves and others. Part of this project is to stay out of reach of the state physically (through staying alive, unharmed, and out of prison), and outside of its ideological reach through being a kind of subject that the state has difficulty imagining and therefore is difficult to punish. This means that when the *compas* are successful in being the kind of ethical, selfless, collectively minded people that they seek to be, and that they wish populated the world, they are both safer and more effective agents of social change.

In contrast, the state wishes to retain control over its subjects and resources. Because the various levels of government are paying a lot of attention to the movements, when individuals succeed in being, even for an ill-advised afternoon, the kind of individual, self-interested, autonomous protagonist that the state is equipped to discipline, it does so. This does not mean that the mechanisms of social control in the Frente effectively work to the state's advantage, it means that through violence the state is helping to create the kinds of political subjects who benefit from working outside of it (Scott 2009), and who may desire to destroy it.

The interplay between visibility, protagonism, and becoming a good *compa* plays out in party politics as well as civil disobedience. One afternoon Virgilio and I found ourselves in a coffee shop in Mexico City. The people we had come to the city to visit were not around, so I took the opportunity to ask him about his involvement with the PRD (the leftist social

democratic political party) over ten years ago. We ordered cappuccinos and I left my digital recorder off. Virgilio sipped his coffee slowly and smiled sheepishly, seemingly a little embarrassed that he used to be involved in party politics. By even asking about this past, I was treading a delicate line between wanting a political education and accusing him of not being genuine in his selfless desires for social change.

Virgilio told me that he wasn't in the party for very long, about three years. He said that he came to realize through those three years that the party couldn't come close to realizing any profound change in the country because the PRD didn't want profound change. It wanted to take charge. There was a lot of "protagonismo" in the party, he said. He explained that everyone wanted to become powerful politicians, and the party itself wanted to be in charge at the expense of what was good for the common people of the country. Leaning forward over the small, round table, he came very close to me, seeming to choose his words very carefully. Protagonism, he told me, is one of the biggest dangers that social movements face. He explained that you have to switch off leadership so that you can't cut off all of the heads at the same time. Not that there are heads, he added. The organization should be able to function at any time without any one leader. This is something that the state isn't good at dealing with. The state's reasoning is that leaders do everything, Virgilio explained, but there is a big difference between inspiring and empowering people to do things and ordering them. The state doesn't understand this, he said, because the state works through following orders. They call up to order an attack. He explained that in a social movement, everyone takes leadership roles and makes decisions.

Political parties, for Virgilio, are not conducive to virtuous politics or being a good compa. People use them to advance individual careers, or to become rich and gain notoriety. The organization of political parties that rely on individual political offices arranged in a hierarchy are completely at odds with carrying out politics that benefit everyone. According to Virgilio, politics is only beneficial when people work for the betterment of others, not for the betterment of themselves, and the two are mutually exclusive. People have also tried to use the Frente to further their own careers and for personal enrichment and, according to Virgilio, everyone suffered as a consequence. Virgilio believes (along with most people I knew in the

Frente) that the strength of the Frente lies in it having as little to do with party politics as possible.

His narrative also reveals the disjunctures between the organization of the Frente as a collectivity of *compas*, and the state's conception of them as individual, autonomous political subjects who are punished for individual criminal acts. In the disjunctures, visible selfless inspirational figures like Nacho del Valle get punished for the protagonistic mistakes of others. According to Virgilio, because the state does not know how to discipline collective actors, or punish actions carried out by a collectivity rather than an individual, it just grabs whatever individuals it can recognize and that can fit into its conception of its political subjects.

Nacho del Valle, although the most recognized face and name connected to the Frente, was frequently held up as the example of an ideal *compa*; a leader without protagonism. The almost religious adoration that clung to his name and image in 2009 was only heightened by the fact that he was serving a sentence of over 100 years in a maximum security prison for being the most recognized face of the Frente. Cris, a middle-aged schoolteacher, reveals this adoration in her description of him, comparing him to Jesus, and explaining how his leadership lacks protagonism:

He is a love. There are moments that are tense and that he has yelled, but it was because things were very dangerous and he knows his responsibility. He never wanted to be leader. But he is a real leader because with his example, he has always taught us. And he continues to teach us. And from prison he continues to teach us. It makes me sad because I know that they are mistreating him every day. .... I know that he doesn't deserve it, but I also know that it is a mission for him. I know that it is his mission. I know that Jesus came to this world to complete His mission. He [Nacho] also has a mission. Jesus was persecuted. He was also put in jail, in prison, tortured, exactly for fighting for our brothers, for humanity.

According to Cris, the appropriate disposition of a compa is to fight and be assertive, but for the sake of others and not recognition or self-gain. One should never seek out leadership, but may accept it if others insist. This is how one may become a leader without becoming a protagonist. People should not step forward eagerly and ambitiously to lead because they believe themselves capable; they should be pushed forward against their will because others believe them to be capable. In her narrative, Cris also reveals a conception that teaching others as an effective leader does not happen didactically through instruction and commands, but through quietly providing a good example that others are inspired to follow. Furthermore, leadership is not a privilege, but a burden, and comes with dramatic and painful consequences. It should be seen in the light of self-sacrifice and public service, not to be used for personal recognition or gain.

The theory of political efficacy in the narratives of all of the members of the Frente quoted above is in direct opposition to one of the main tenets of neoliberalism: that the collectivity benefits from individuals acting in their own self-interest (Smith 1910, Harvey 2007). Instead, Virgilio, Maria, and Cris are adamant that individuals acting in their own self-interest is very damaging to the collective welfare, and good can only come of people acting selflessly and sacrificing for others.

Furthermore, they do not identify this conception as a uniquely Mexican (or indigenous/rural/working class/peasant) cultural attribute stemming from an unchanged cultural legacy. There are definite roots in this conception of *compañerismo* in local traditions of consensus-based government, and the Frente's history of association with indigenous Zapatistas. Two less obvious genealogies however, are a legacy of anarchist social movements and female gender archetypes.

Jerome Mintz (2004 [1982]) describes a peasant anarchist movement from pre-Civil War (1930s) Spain in which anarchist ideology encouraged a radical non-hierarchical communitarianism and the social policing of “egoism”. Jeff Juris (2009) also connects a renewed emphasis on non-hierarchical collectivism to a contemporary increased influence of anarchism in transnational anti-globalization social movement networks. I will explore this connection between *compañerismo* and anarchism further in Chapter 6.

*Companerismo* also shares many characteristics with the gendered archetype of the Mexican *abnegada* (literally, the abnegated woman), a figure that Olcott defines as “selfless[ness], martyrdom, self-sacrifice, an erasure of self and the negation of one’s outward existence” (2005: 15-16). The *abnegada* lives only for her children and her husband and thinks nothing of herself, much like a good *compa* thinks nothing of him/herself and only of the collective. The *abnegada* is an extreme archetype of a diffuse, interdependent woman who exists only in relation to others and never for herself. The difference is that the *abnegada* does not live in a society of other *abnegadas* each doing for one another. She exists as an archetype in relation to that other, more famous gendered Mexican archetype: the *machista*. I do not wish to equate *protagonismo* with *machismo* and *compañerismo* with the *abnegada*. To do so would flatten the complexity of how gendered performances (themselves much more complex than archetypes allow) intersect in multiple ways with ideas of *compañerismo*. This topic deserves more thorough analysis than can be examined here. However, it is important to note that ideas of *machistas* and *abnegadas* are intimately tied up with ideas of power and solidarity (Maltz and Borker 1982), hierarchy and equality.

*Companerismo* is about gender, but it is also about class, race, sexuality, and even age. As I argued above, it is about being subject to (and subjects of) a host of global political and



economic forces that intersect in different ways for different people. Whether the ideological genealogy of *compañerismo* is traced through feminism, anarchism, or another tradition of social organizing, the subject and object of these genealogies are the complex ways that power and hierarchy are produced and reproduced through practice and experience. *Compañerismo* takes focus away from the specificity of these hierarchies and sources of power to focus on ‘hierarchy’ and ‘power’ itself.

In the experiences of Beto, Virgilio, Maria, and many other members of the Frente, the collectively damaging consequences of self-interest were realized over time through a series of personal mistakes and first-hand experiences. Each of these people have acted in self-interested ways, have seen other people from Atenco act in self-interested ways, and have come to the conclusion that it is better, and more politically effective, to act in a selfless manner that concerns itself only with others and the collectivity. They do not claim a commitment to collectivity as a characteristic of Atenco, Mexico, citizenship, or any marginalized group. They claim it as a universally human trait. As Beto and Ana Maria reveal in their personal narratives, there was a transformation of self that occurred as a result of their participation in the movement that brought out this trait and encouraged it as a virtue.

Here I turn to explore what the specific mechanisms are through which this transformation of self (or ethical disposition) occurred with particular attention to the experiences of filmmakers in exploring the practices, the *habitus*, of becoming a *compa*. This population is interesting for two reasons:

First, because examining cultural producers who participated in the movement allows us to investigate the intersection between collective processes of self production, and processes of cultural production in terms of media production and the creative arts. Cultural production is

important, as I argued above, because it helps account for the more elusive, extra-legal cultural and social transformations that successful social movements can bring about. Examining filmmakers allows us to make connections between theories of how social movements work to generate transformations, and theories of how media work to do the same. An emphasis on the cultivation of self allows us to view both as forces of cultural production, and both as transformations that occur in the realm of human relationships.

Second, filmmakers are interesting to examine in terms of *compañerismo* because they are both of the Frente and apart from it to various degrees. Beto, is an *ejidatario*, a resident of Atenco, and a self-taught filmmaker. Salvador Díaz is from an *ejidatario* family from the Atenco area, but is a professionally trained filmmaker and university professor who resides in a nearby city. He is part of Mexico's middle class intelligentsia and has run for office several times in the PRD (the center-left party). Greg Berger is also a professional and a university professor of film. He is a white, Jewish citizen of the United States who has lived in Central Mexico for many years, and who makes films exclusively about Mexican politics for US and Mexican audiences. Each man chose filmmaking as a practice of participating in the Frente and cultivating himself as a *compañero*. Examining people who actively sought out such a transformation (rather than examining people for whom the decision was "choiceless" (Aretxaga 1997)) can help us understand participation in a movement as a purposeful practice of cultivating an ethical disposition. I do not claim that these three men were equally successful in becoming *compañeros*, or came to their political practice from a similar position of disenfranchisement or necessity. However, neither are they very different from one another in their desires to create a better, more equal, and less hierarchical world. It is through their differences that the difficulties and subtleties of creating an ethical disposition of *compañerismo* come to light.

### 3.3 BETO

Beto is a self-taught filmmaker in his 40s from Atenco who makes his living, along with his wife, recording family celebrations such as weddings, quinceañeras, and community festivals. His videos are compilations of events edited with music and graphics, with no commentary and only occasional titles to lead the viewer through the action. They are more video photo albums than documentaries, and he is hired as one might hire a wedding photographer—so that friends and family members can be reminded of an important event. He also records community festivals such as Carnival, and sells his compilations on the street in front of the Comisario to people who would like to remember the festivities.

Beto began recording political events in 2001 as part of the movement. He says that he and his wife, then with two small children, made a conscious decision to be a part of the movement. As he made his living making videos, that is what he felt he could contribute to the movement. The following narrative is long, but reveals Beto's reasons for making films about the Frente, and his personal experience of transformation through filmmaking.

First, [I recorded] as an observer. It was to observe, to see, spend time with [*convivir*] and participate. I wasn't comfortable anywhere because I'm not an orator. I can chat for hours and hours, but I'm not a speaker with a microphone or- even less if there are a lot of people. However, I did video. So in some commissions that were formed- [let's say] a commission has to be formed to go and protect the north point of the ejido, for example. So I went with my video camera to record. I began in a way, consciously or unconsciously, to support in what I knew how to do. Or what I try to do. That is to record with a totally amateur [*casera*] little video camera, because the resources don't allow [anything more professional]. However, we tried to give the activities that they do in the demonstrations the focus that we do in the fiestas. And in this way, little by little, I was collecting images. ... And I was nine months of resistance with the Frente. Day and night we stayed there. We made guards...

We made the decision, my wife and I, to participate, because in the end, we were doing it with our family. Our children. Our future. Not us as people,

but [as] the generations that would lose everything [if the land were expropriated]. So, we took the clear and conscious decision that we also ran a high risk. We decided that if the shit hits the fan [*si nos caiga la chingada*]- well, what can we do? We are doing something for the community. And this is more valuable.

So you realize- you get a consciousness. A consciousness. I didn't even participate in the clean water assemblies [before]. I didn't participate in anything. I was simply another spectator. But, in the *lucha* itself, in the nine months of resistance, it gives you a consciousness [*te llevaron una conciencia*], every day you are discovering another Mexico. When testimonies begin to arrive of people who have been dispossessed [*despojados*], maltreated, murdered in other parts of the country, or in the world. So this surprises you and raises interest and you get more and more involved [*te vas clavando, clavando*]. When you realize, you are no longer the quiet, mute spectator that recorded video, you become in some way a protagonist of the film too. Of course, from my point of work, which is to record video.

For Beto and his wife, filmmaking was a way to participate in the movement and contribute their particular skills in the struggle against the airport. He says that they participated in the movement, “not as people, but as a generation” to highlight the selfless intention of their participation. They made a decision to sacrifice their personal safety for the sake of their children and future generations, not for any personal gain, or even to save the land for themselves. Furthermore, through participating in the movement, he changed. His sense of self as a political subject changed from passivity to action, and he began to think of himself as part of a collectivity, a process that he describes as “gaining a consciousness”. His use of the term ‘protagonist’ is unique in that it is the only time that I heard the word used in a positive context. It reveals the overlap between the visibility of protagonists in the movement, and as the hero or recognizable character in films. Before he was only behind the camera, and after developing a consciousness of collectivity, he is in front of it. He notes that being in front of the camera carries a great danger, but it is a sacrifice he is willing to make for the sake of his children and future generations.

There is a tension in Beto's narrative between this sacrifice (taken for the betterment of everyone) and his transformation into a protagonist through filmmaking. This is an irreconcilable tension that arises in the experiences of all three filmmakers. Beto's intention is to help the movement selflessly and make the Frente visible as a collectivity (with all of the safety and strength of collective visibility mentioned above). Filmmaking however, also makes visible and draws attention to the individual filmmaker, both from within the movement and to government surveillance. In other words, through filmmaking, Beto is making the collective visible as a protagonist on screen in valuable ways, but off screen he is also making himself visible as an individual protagonist in dangerous and counterproductive ways. This tension, between creating collective and individual protagonists, is made evident in how he initially presents the word 'protagonist' as a personal state ("you become...a protagonist of the film") and then immediately draws back to claim a place that is only part of a larger, collective protagonist ("of course, from my point of work").

Although Beto was not used to doing feature-length documentaries, he helped produce a film chronicling the airport struggle that was released in 2002 after the decree was abrogated called *La Tierra No Se Vende, Se Ama y Se Defiende* [Land is not for selling, it is for loving and defending] (Frente de Pueblos en Defensa de la Tierra 2002). Beto calls this film a "video overview [reseña]" of the movement. The film is a compilation of televised news reports spliced together in chronological order with footage taken of marches and demonstrations in the community. There is no voiceover narration other than the newscasters' narrations, although the action is often punctuated with written titles that supplement the (not always positive) narration of the newscasters. Much like a commemorative video of a party or event, the emphasis in the film is on including a lot of material rather than providing a unique vision or analysis of events.

His primary audience, much like the primary audience of his videos of community events, was made up of the people of the Frente themselves. He said, “People wanted to see how they had participated in this successful struggle. And the people bought it.” In other words, the emphasis in the film is not on providing analysis, articulating a unique vision of the Frente, or allowing the audience to see the events in a new way. Instead, people watched the video to see themselves, friends, and family members on screen, much like you would watch home movies. It is an added thrill to see the reproduction of news broadcasts. Not many people recorded these broadcasts, and so to have them on DVD to re-watch and show is a special treat. This footage reveals how well-known and powerful the Frente was.

Beto also helped produce a unique multimedia CD with another local artist, Cayo Vicente. Cayo Vicente is a musician and poet who wrote numerous songs about the Frente during the airport struggle, and was called on by the movement to perform at political events. He continued to perform political songs and poetry at plantones and political marches into 2009, and selling his CDs while he wasn’t on stage. *¿Que Hicimos? ¡Vencimos!* (2003) [What did we do? We triumphed!] is primarily a music CD that will work in a standard CD player, with alternating tracks of poetry and songs, all of which are about the Frente and the airport struggle or social movements in general. However, if put in a computer, there is the option to listen to the music while watching a compilation of still imagery and video that Beto compiled. It is something between a music video and home movies with a professionally produced soundtrack.

The visual emphasis in this piece is on illustrating the continuity between the local, cultural festivities of Atenco and the social movement. A consistent theme throughout is images of large numbers of people moving forward through the streets of Atenco dancing in parades and traditional costumes, and large numbers of people moving forward through the streets of Mexico

City with banners and chanting slogans in political marches. Images of men and women dancing in couples to folk music, advancing and retreating against one another flirtatiously, dissolve into images of protestors and police ‘dancing’ together as they advance and retreat against one another menacingly. These images are a perfect companion to the soundtrack, in which Vicente sets political lyrics (sometimes merely compilations of slogans) to the tunes of local folk music. The effect is a portrayal of a unified community that deeply values its traditions and draws on them in an active process of change and evolution. The traditions (treated uncritically as a naturalized part of community life) seem to teach the participants how to act to create change, even as the change is celebrated as a way of enriching the traditions.

Beto did not put his name on the documentary. The only credits of the film were attributed to the Frente de Pueblos en Defensa de la Tierra, the thirteen affected communities of the expropriation decree, and the people who were killed in the struggle over the airport. However, he did put his name on the multimedia CD that he produced with Vicente. He feels that this was a mistake. He felt that by putting his name on the CD he made himself visible as an individual in the movement, much as how Maria feared that the authorities would single her out for marching at the front of political marches. As a consequence, during the repression in 2006 the police entered his home and pulled out everyone staying there, including his wife’s elderly parents. He believes that he was being punished because of his involvement in the movement as a videographer, and it is clear from his story below that the police knew who he was and how he contributed to the movement. He told me about this experience the first time that I met him, at a press conference in Mexico City in 2009. As we talked, he leaned on his tripod as another young man put away his camera and packed up the equipment.

They went to the house and from there they took [everyone] out ... They take me, my father-in-law, my brother-in-law, my mother-in-law. And they tortured all of us. ... An individual of the public force takes me [*me sujeta*] by the collar and says ... “Now Beto, you’re not going to record” And I said, “No, I think that I’m not going to record now.” And it begins to make him laugh. ... [The officer] comes and he says, “This is the one who records videos, boss. He records the videos.” They interrogated me. And they stop the camera- because they were recording. They raise your face and you have to answer what they ask. If you don’t answer, they hit you. So I was saying that yes, I recorded videos. And, “Oh yeah?” They stopped the camera, “wait” and pom-pom, they hit me and the next time they say, “Suffer. Suffer, so that you learn the camera well.” [*se pena, se pena, para que sabe bien de la camara*]. ... We believe [they ransacked the house] more in the tone of looting than as a strategy of intelligence to see what I had. ... They robbed money, jewelry, bracelets, half of the- things like that. Money. They took two cameras, one a still camera, computer memory, a hard drive.

Revealed in Beto’s narrative is the complexity of the power of visibility and the presence of the camera. The attacking police reversed the direction of the camera toward the filmmaker, joking that he won’t record today and pointing the camera at his face as they beat him. They were careful to turn off the camera while actually hitting him in an attempt to erase their physical violence and record only his submission. As Beto describes them and his torture, the police felt that the camera was a weapon, one that they had felt was used against them in the past, and were relishing the opportunity to use against someone who had recorded them.

Beto is careful to mention that he felt the police were not interested in his footage for intelligence reasons. Such a careful visual record of the Frente’s activities could be very dangerous to the movement and for other individuals in the movement. A few people whispered to me, with significant glances, that they didn’t know why Beto recorded so much because there were few results of his work. The implication was that he was passing his recordings on to government intelligence. Beto was perhaps aware of this criticism, or possibly realized his



mistake, painfully, during torture, because in this same interview, he was careful to point out to me that now he tries to release videos online as soon as possible after the footage was taken.

[We publish it quickly] so it flows. This also generates- it doesn't generate this sentiment of- or this vision that we are keeping [*guardando*] things. No, it's always flowing. ... We try to synthesize the essence of the event and publish it immediately so that- also to take this tendency away from them. And now not commit the error of 2001 and 2002, to keep everything.

There is a danger in recording that does not exist in most other ways of participating in the Frente. Recording peoples' actions, and possibly their faces, can make them visible in destructive ways. The video can be used as intelligence so that the police knows who is doing what. It can also be used to prosecute people for acts of civil disobedience. The camera is a powerful and dangerous force that can make visible protagonists out of rank-and-file members of the movement. Keeping the footage was a mistake because it made people question why he was recording and what was happening to the footage.

Beto's story brings to light the multiple ways that being a compa is policed, both internally and externally. His fellow compañeros police his actions and motivations through rumor and suspicion that he might be recording for selfish purposes (to gain favor or money from government authorities interested in the Frente). The state literally polices his actions through violence, punishing his visibility and unique contributions to the movement. Both forces work to encourage him to cultivate a commitment to collectivity and selflessness. Filmmaking is a challenging activity to cultivate these qualities because it is so visible and the risk is high, but it is important because he gets personal satisfaction out of the creative endeavor, and can compile visual evidence of the wrongdoings of the state in a way only possible through video recordings. The right way to do it, as he learned painfully, is to refuse any personal recognition, and give all of his work selflessly, without regard to ownership, to the movement. Beto set out to contribute

selflessly to the movement through making films, and in the process encountered difficulties and dangers that allowed him to use filmmaking as a practice in cultivating and further developing an ethical disposition as a compa.

### 3.4 SALVADOR DÍAZ

Salvador Díaz is a tall, thin man in his 60s with a hyperactive and enthusiastic energy. He is from a small town in the Atenco area, but has spent most of his adult life living in the nearby small city of Texcoco. He teaches journalism classes at a local agricultural university and various classes at a local high school. In 2009 he was completing a Ph.D. in Rural Development, arguing that the camera could be used as a research tool. During my time in Atenco I was frequently in his house while he edited video or for numerous parties, two events that often overlapped. During the long hours at political events and marches, I often found myself walking, chatting, and eating with him, his wife Odette Castelao, and their 15 year-old daughter. Luis, a twenty-year old a former student of Díaz's who helps him record and edit video, was also frequently with them and was considered another member of the family. Although Díaz is the director and editor of his films, Odette and Luis record the vast majority of the footage in his films. Díaz described his political pedigree to me in 2008:

I entered after studying an undergraduate degree [*licenciatura*] in journalism and collective communication in the Department of Political and Social Sciences in the UNAM. While I was doing my thesis and supporting leftist movements, unions, especially campesino movements, I heard the announcement of the film school on the radio. So I went to register. Because my idea, half joking, half seriously, is to say, 'I want to make the revolution, and film is a medium to make the revolution.' I still think it. ...

The second year I did a film that is called *El Eden Bajo el Fusil* [Eden under the gun]. ... In *El Eden Bajo el Fusil*, I solidify many of my political aspirations because as a boy I wanted to be a guerilla warrior [*guerrillero*]. I wanted to change the world with the rifle [*fusil*] and all of that. But I could never

connect myself. I lived here in a pueblo, in Texcoco. I was a campesino and I didn't have any contacts. But there in Guerrero, where the meaning of *El Eden Bajo el Fusil* is, I find myself with diverse campesino movements: coco workers, coffee workers ... and especially the guerilleros. ...

Although his boyhood dreams may have been to become a guerilla, his career aspirations soon turned toward more mainstream political activities. Returning to Texcoco, he ran for political office several times in various left-of-center parties including the PRD, and began to teach university and high school journalism courses. Between 1985 and 2001, Díaz was only involved in the production of two film projects. Díaz did not return to filmmaking in earnest until the availability of digital video and desktop editing software. He admitted that although he would have liked to make more films between the time that he graduated from the CUEC in the mid-1980s and his first purchase of an iMac computer in 2001, he simply didn't have the economic resources to make it feasible. Now, after buying a Mac, he prides himself on his productivity and the speed with which he can finish a film.

When asked about his current or recent projects in 2008, Díaz listed a dizzying series of projects, some of which were produced in only a few days for very specific purposes, with titles such as *Las Andanzas del Sátrapa* [The Adventures of the Despot], *El Divino Llantar* [The Divine Weeping], *De Luto Visten Los Heroes* [Heroes Dress for Mourning], *Rojas Estampas de la Dulce Montaña* [Red Impressions of the Sweet Mountain] and *La Vida en el Alambre* [Life on the Wire]<sup>9</sup>. In July 2008, he boasted that he had made four films in the last six months. Some of these films were political in nature, and these he signs under the name Producciones Klan Destino, a pun meaning Clandestine Productions or Clan Destiny Productions and an allusion to a Manu Chao song. His more irreverent (or in his words, his "light" productions) he signs under the (intentionally misspelled) name Producciones Sal de Ubas [Alka-Seltzer Productions].

As can be seen by his titles, Díaz favors heavily poetic narrations, sometimes written in fantastically obscure and difficult literary Spanish. His usual process is to immerse himself in the topic, record as much as possible, and then sit down to write a script. Using his poetic narration as a guide, he pieces together the visuals of the film, articulating his ornate and philosophical verbal metaphors with local recorded imagery. Unlike Beto, Díaz's process is deeply interpretive and analytical. Very much like Beto however, he has a deep appreciation for the history, culture, and nationalistic symbols of Mexico and the Atenco region. He delights in imagery of old campesino men and women, men drinking and singing, bullfighters, children, and agricultural landscapes. Díaz characterizes his work as resulting from a deeply emotional process that he hopes inspires emotions in his audience.

When I am here [in my house] I am crying when I am editing. With Atenco- [sighs heavily], there were more tears than- really. Many, many. ... I was like this [sniffing and wiping his cheeks and eyes] frequently [*a cada rato*].

Díaz's purchase of an iMac and digital video camera in 2001 coincided with the expropriation decree in Atenco, and he began to record the movement from its earliest days. His partner, Odette Castalao Frías, also began to record in 2001 and became a constant presence in the movement with her camera. She describes herself in those early years as "the cameraperson of the movement". She remembers traveling everywhere with the Frente, sometimes beyond her comfort level. Castalao holds a university degree in Chemistry, so using the camera was a new experience for her, but it was also a pleasant one. I asked her in 2009, if she thought she would have been as involved with the movement against the airport if she weren't recording.

Yes. Of course. [But] it's nicer [bonito] for me to record. Because to keep these images, and then go through them, and to have access to watching them again- I think that I have a privilege that the rest of the compañeros don't have. And this enables you to have more access to- for example- they put me in the offices of the judges with the camera. If I hadn't have had a camera, they would have taken me

out. But they [the judges] were mad, they said, “Don’t record.” and I recorded. Like it was a weapon. ... I enter with a camera, it was- even to bother them, to show them that we weren’t afraid of them, and that we are going to denounce, and that we are denouncing all of their atrocities and unjust trespasses [*atropellos*]. So I feel that it is a privilege to have the camera.

Although nearly all of the other filmmakers included in this research tend to see the adjectives “radical” and “militant” as pejorative, or at least detractors’ attempts at deprecation, Díaz and Castelao see these adjectives as not only positive, but necessary. They are very proud to make radical militant films, and strive to be ever more militant in their processes and political positions. Díaz considers the products of Producciones Klan Destino to be militant, and as he mentions in the quote above, to be an instrument of revolution. Castelao, in her quote above, compares her use of the camera to a weapon. In another interview in 2009, I asked Díaz what are the characteristics that make a film militant:

That you convert yourself into another member of the organization, even when it is circumstantial [*coyuntural*]. But that your commitment sympathizes with those of the organization. ... So yes, taking sides [*tomar partido*]. But not the side of a political party. To take the side of an organization, for the people who fight, the people from below [*de abajo*]. ... Everything that I want to do is build [*armar*] or try to wake up the consciousness of people. That’s what it is. Someone who is not militant, they don’t care [*le vale*]. They don’t care if it reaches [the audience] or not. What they are interested in is making money [*sacar feria*], to do another one, and be applauded. ... If I didn’t believe in this, maybe I would dedicate myself to charging money [*sacar feria*] here and there. And go around looking for grants and things.

This passage reveals Díaz’s conception of filmmaking as a process that builds the collectivity of the movement in two ways. First, filmmaking allows him personally to become “another member of the organization” and “take sides” in a partisan way, even though he is not an ejidatario or a resident of Atenco. For Díaz, filmmaking is a practice of giving himself and his skills selflessly for the benefit of others, a practice I have been referring to as becoming a *compa*. If he doesn’t do this, looks for recognition, earns money, or “go[es] around looking for

grants and things,” his efforts are less valid and are not militant enough to help the movement. Second, his selfless contribution is valuable because it acts to wake up the consciousness of others, and builds a commitment to collectivity in the viewer also. For Díaz, these two goals are intricately related. If he were to succumb to the pitfalls of protagonism and seek out recognition or money, his films would be less effective in raising the consciousness of the viewer, or cultivating *their* commitment to collectivity.

Like Beto, Díaz comes under public scrutiny for his activities as a filmmaker. When asked their opinion of his films, some members of the Frente (as well as other filmmakers) told me that his narration is overly poetic and interpretive, turning the collective performance of the movement into individual creative expression. Others suggested to me that he does use his films for personal gain because he has put his name on the films, has run for political office, and has produced work for the PRD. All of these are indicators of protagonism. Some criticize him for accepting the Ariel in the 1980s, saying that if he were not seeking out recognition, he would have turned down the award. Others have mentioned to me that it seems suspicious that although he has been at the scene of many violent incidents, he has never been arrested or beaten<sup>10</sup>.

These accusations upset Díaz deeply. He argues that his narrations are not meant to draw attention to his abilities and education, but to tug at the heartstrings of the viewer and celebrate the movement. He believes that, as a professional, putting his name on films and running for office gives him a level of legitimacy and protection against violent police action. Even so, he takes it for granted that his actions are constantly monitored, his phone is tapped, and he must constantly regulate his actions and behavior so as not to be the object of violence. In short, he argues that he is visible as an individual because he is a professional, but he uses his profession

entirely as a militant practice in cultivating *compañerismo* and solidarity. He argues he has always chosen a commitment to the collectivity over personal recognition, and his filmmaking is an ethical practice of being a *compa*.

As evidence, he cites an occasion when he was subpoenaed to appear in court and testify that he had made a specific documentary about Atenco. According to Díaz, in this documentary was footage that could have incriminated some *compañeros*, but in order for the film to be admissible in court as evidence, the filmmaker had to appear and vouch for the documentary. If Díaz claimed the film as his own, the film could be used as evidence and people might go to prison. Appearing with a lawyer and risking being held in contempt of court, he refused to vouch for the documentary so that it could not be used as evidence. The case ended well in that Díaz behaved selflessly and without ownership, was not held in contempt of court, and the documentary was not used as evidence. However, the case also had a chilling effect on him and his views of production. He felt that part of the reason he was called to testify was to show him that he was being monitored. He also learned that although he believed he was working with the Frente and in the Frente's best interests, his documentaries could have negative and unintended consequences. He has not made a documentary about the Frente since.

### **3.5 GREG BERGER**

Greg Berger is from New York, a white American who lives in Mexico most of the time. He teaches video production at the Autonomous University of the State of Mexico (UAEM) in Cuernavaca, and tours college campuses in the United States with his video productions. We initially spoke in 2007 (in English) when he told me about how he came to be making documentary films in Mexico:

I think that even though I had been vaguely [a] political activist all my life, ... when I came to Mexico [it] was the first time that I saw that I got excited, not by resistance to a crappy system in which we live, but actually the most creative solutions and alternatives that I'd ever seen. ... I've become more radical in my politics as time goes on, not mellowing out, quite the opposite. It was always my hope that by showing images of successful social movements like, for example Atenco, was a model for a long time until this repression took last year. But by showing these successful examples of organizing against neoliberalism, that people could be inspired to actually continue their own battles in the United States. And that's always been a hope. ... I think that true change, true resistance, true alternatives can only at this point be built in certain parts of the world and I think that Latin America is the most fertile terrain for those changes. And that's coincided with the feeling personally of actually feeling less and less like an American citizen and more like a virtual citizen of Mexico. Now, I'm married to a Mexican woman, my son is Mexican, I live here, I have no plans of going back to the States. I've participated in my local community. I feel like a virtual citizen of Mexico.

In 2007 Berger identified strongly as a 'revolutionary tourist'. The name came from a derogatory remark by a past president of Mexico commenting on the foreigners who come to connect with the Zapatistas in Chiapas. Berger explained to me that he took on the name to acknowledge his privileged role as a tourist – someone who can come and go as he pleases and be as involved (or not) as he wishes. In defense of the term he explained,

There's obviously, this whole sort of history of people from the – leftists from the Global North living out romantic fantasies of revolution in Latin America. There's a whole long history of that and my argument is that it's problematic, but not only, but it's not only valid, but it's actually necessary. ... It's necessary to support each other in our struggles. It's necessary that we participate in each other's struggles. I think that traditionally that has happened mostly along the lines of people from the Global North going down to support struggles in the Global South. In essence, I think it should be more mutual. It should be more – it should go both ways, not just one way.

Berger helped make two films about Atenco, one named *¡Tierra Si! ¡Aviones No!* [*Land, Yes! Airplanes No!*], which came out at the beginning of 2002, and another called *Atenco, la Rebelión de los Machetes* [*Atenco, the Machete Rebellion*], which was released in the fall of 2002. Another filmmaker acquaintance of Berger's contacted him



about making a film in Atenco because, according to Berger, they needed some equipment and a place to edit, both resources he was able to provide. One of their three-person team was from the Atenco area and they went to record. In 2008 I asked Berger specifically about making this first Atenco film:

At that point, I believed in the- I certainly felt identified with the people of Atenco and I believed in their struggle. And from the very outset the intent was to essentially embed ourselves with the people from Atenco. ... The funny thing was that first we made *¡Tierra Si! ¡Aviones No!*, which only went up to December, so it was only the first two or three months of the struggle. And when we finished it, I still didn't really have a personal relationship with anybody from Atenco. The funny thing is that a very horrible thing happened to us, and that horrible thing actually set into motion a series of events which made my relationship with the people of Atenco much more personal. And it is a relationship that continues to this day. What happened was [the other filmmakers] were able to convince someone ... basically from the PRD to make ... a whole bunch of copies. So when they did that, unfortunately what they did was that they took the master, without our permission, [and] they inserted the PRD logo. ... And without our permission, they went ahead to Atenco with all of these boxes of tapes. And they started distributing them, and Nacho and América and Trini [Nacho's daughter and wife, respectively] and a whole bunch of other people basically seized them and said that they couldn't distribute them. And so when we got there, they were really pissed at us already and we were confused because we didn't know that this was happening. ... And so we were kind of—I wouldn't say detained—but we were asked to come talk with them for a while. And on the one hand it was great because that was the first time that we really had a long heart-to-heart discussion with some of the main players in the Frente de Pueblos en Defensa de la Tierra.

Berger and his crewmates had a very difficult, serious conversation with people from the Frente because they were careless about how they distributed the film. The Frente did not want to be coopted by the PRD, and did not want anyone in the PRD to use the incredible political power of the Frente at the time for any spurious or protagonistic projects. Berger explains how this might have happened through putting the PRD logo on their film:

The PRD is filled with these operatives who advance in the political machinery by the kind of measurable works- kind of public works that they are able to achieve. Really for this schmuck who made all these copies of the film, it was just the

same as paving a street. It was just one thing that he could stick a feather in his cap to try to get a higher rank- a higher position within the PRD framework.

The kind of personal advancement through using the social movement (and the filmmaking work of others) is exactly the kind of selfish protagonism that Virgilio described. Furthermore, the video made it appear as if the Frente were allying with the PRD, one of the political entities that had initially had no difficulty with the airport project. Even so, as Berger mentioned above, this horrible thing that happened through naiveté had some positive results.

It led to some good conversations with the people in Atenco and personally it was the first time that this- 'I mean, what the fuck are you doing here anyway? You're a gringo.' And what it really did is that it started a much more intimate level of discussion with those guys and started a long road to friendship that continues now. And is particularly painful now because this person that I care about is serving a life sentence in jail.

In other words, through making this film and, in particular, making a significant mistake, Berger came to develop a closer relationship with Ignacio del Valle and some other key figures in the Frente. He set out, as part of his revolutionary tourist project, to make connections to inspiring social movements through film and he succeeded in becoming involved. This relationship, involvement and collaborative relationship happened however, through being confronted with his careless action. Berger's involvement began somewhat blindly, with an indistinct desire to help. He made a mistake, and in the process became a less naïve, more helpful, and more giving compa. These relationships were of the utmost importance to Berger's process because of the way he conceives of film working to help a social movement.

A lot of what successful community-based documentary does is provide a mirror for a community to see itself, not as they themselves would make a portrait of themselves, but perhaps through the eyes of others and what others see in them highlights things that perhaps they themselves did not see in themselves. And therefore it is a useful and powerful mirror that then becomes reflected back at that community

Even though the Frente and the people of Atenco themselves were a primary audience of the film, Berger's team made efforts to screen their films to other communities throughout Mexico and the United States. The same team made another film about Atenco, called *Atenco, rebelión de los machetes*, and they traveled around Mexico and the United States screening the film and attempting to inspire people to organize against unwanted development projects such as the airport. Berger explains the importance of the case of Atenco.

After Atenco there were all sorts of projects that were opposed, and all sorts of people around Mexico were emboldened by the Frente, which is part of the reason why they were repressed in 2006. But all sorts of local struggles throughout Mexico were emboldened by the Atenco victory. And we traveled all around Mexico showing *¡Tierra Si! ¡Aviones No!* and *The Machete Rebellion* in different towns ... We used it as, you could say, an organizing tool, but also as a cheerleading device to convince people that you can organize and you can fight, and you can win.

For Berger, filmmaking has been a way to become involved in, and show solidarity with, Latin American social movements. Through filmmaking he has become more involved in politics and has made personal connections and relationships that he otherwise would not have made. He has also transformed as a person. His political views have become more radical and he has come to think of himself as a Mexican citizen. He has an increased commitment to collectivity and sees his practice as a way of giving himself over to building connections and community among transnational social movements. His filmmaking practices have also changed as a result of social policing of protagonismo. He is much more careful about who he accepts money from and how his films are distributed.

### 3.6 COMPETITIVE SELFLESSNESS

Each of these three filmmakers became personally and politically involved with the Frente through filmmaking. They wanted to express solidarity with the movement and do something that would be a positive addition to its project of social change. They each wanted to be a *compañero*, and found filmmaking as a way of becoming one. The practice of participating in the Frente through filmmaking became a *habitus* that changed each filmmaker. Beto feels that he is more collectively minded. Salvador Díaz cultivated contacts with *campesinos* and *guerrilleros*. Greg Berger feels that he has become more radical in his politics and that he has become a virtual citizen of Mexico. All three cultivated personal connections through filmmaking, and use it as a means through which to deepen their commitment to social justice and involvement with organized social movements. For Berger and Díaz, the films about the Frente were just one part of a continually evolving practice of participating in a variety of social movements through making films. They used filmmaking as a means to transform themselves (to transform their selves) from passive bystanders to active participants in the movement (Hinegardner 2009) and, in the process, resulted in cultivating an ethical disposition of a more collectively (and less individually) oriented self.

Whereas each filmmaker used his practice as a way to dedicate himself to a collective, the collectivity in the case of each filmmaker is different. Beto became a more integrated member of a local group of *ejidatarios*. Díaz cultivated a commitment to a national collective of social movements working together and supporting one another to transform the country. Berger dedicated himself to increasing the bonds of solidarity among social movements across national boundaries as an international collective project of transforming the world. None of these filmmakers were concerned with articulating a *specific* identity that deserved full citizenship

rights according to New Social Movement models. Instead, they saw cultivating a sense of self that is devoted to collectivity *in general* as the goal. They used filmmaking to raise their own consciousness and those of their viewers, not as a class consciousness (as in Marxist social movements), or black/queer/woman's/indigenous consciousness (as in New Social Movement theories), but as a universal human consciousness of general collectivity.

As Lazar (2008) points out in the context of Bolivian social movements, the cultivation of a collectivist self resists mechanisms of neoliberal governmentality that encourage citizens to be self-interested, profit-seeking, autonomous individuals. However, it does not resist these strategies in the legal arena of the state and formal citizenship rights, but on a much more elusive and profound cultural and social level that can be at once deeply specific to place and tradition, but applicable to every deeply specific place, tradition, social movement, and set of identifications.

The cultivation of this general sense of collectivity detached from specific identifiers, *companerismo*, has profound consequences for the incorporation of intersectionality in social movements. A common experience for members of New Social Movements who belonged to more than one marginalized group was the difficulty of feeling that they had to choose among their various identifications in order to participate fully in the movement (Crenshaw 1991). Black lesbians of the 1970s, for example, felt that they had to choose among participating in movements for Black liberation, Women's movements, and Lesbian movements (see Comahee River Collective 1977, for example). They frequently felt that they didn't belong in any of these movements. The process of raising consciousness and cultivating a strong sense of self that belonged in each of these communities seemed to be independent and mutually exclusive. The Frente's innovation (inspired and preceded by Zapatismo, and World Social Forum) was to

encourage a cultivation of general collectivism that could act as a strength among different social movements, rather than a force that divided and fragmented them.

The narratives of the three filmmakers above reveals that the cultivation of this ethical disposition occurred through a difficult process of negotiation, making mistakes, policing within the movement, and the state's literal policing of visible protagonists. Rather than being a clear and specific path, each filmmaker reveals uncertainty about what the most ethical or the most impactful course might be and uses the creative practice of filmmaking to experiment, and innovate different paths through practice.

Although each has found a political practice through filmmaking that is meaningful to him and that others feel contributes to the collective goals of the Frente, each also is aware of consistent criticism for protagonismo, and are involved in a constant process of self-examination and justification of their own practices and intentions.

In part because of this intensive reflection, filmmakers are in the best position to criticize the minutiae of other filmmakers' practices and products. To varying degrees, all of the filmmakers in this research police and judge, sometimes harshly, the practices and products of other filmmakers. I do not wish to reproduce or encourage this kind of criticism by speaking in specifics, but the practice of policing one another (which can result in long-term animosities and negativity) is a strong force guiding filmmakers' actions and how they represent themselves and their political practices. The policing may help filmmakers to hone their ethical practice of filmmaking, but it is also a serious challenge to the solidarity of filmmaker networks. Most are intimately familiar with one another's work and have a finely tuned eye for critiquing others' practices. It can seem that many political documentary filmmakers (certainly not all, but many) are engaged in a very high-stakes competitive battle of virtue. Many professional communities,

including academic ones, suffer from similar processes of policing one another. Even so, it may seem a contradiction in terms to be self-righteous about selflessness.

It is tempting to conclude, as some of my non-filmmaker informants and friends have, that the gossip, rumors, and criticism show that filmmakers are all merely seeking recognition and prestige through their films (and are therefore engaged in protagonismo). I think it merely reveals the degree to which these filmmakers care about and believe deeply in filmmaking as an ethical and productive political practice and its potential to transform themselves and society.

## CHAPTER 4: VIOLENCE AND VISIBILITY

In this chapter I examine how the Frente used dramatic representation in street theater and documentary films as a strategic tool. I argued previously that the political goals of the Frente did not use a framework of fighting for rights as a particular kind of political, economic, or ethnic subject. Instead, they used a framework conceiving of humans as universally moral and social beings for whom competitive, individualistic economic self-interest is damaging, and for whom a selfless commitment to collectivity is beneficial. In other words, they argued that Atenquenses deserved to keep their land, not because they have rights as individuals, but because they are social human beings (like all people) embedded in a moral economy. This framework poses significant challenges to a political strategy because it sets itself against the state, and yet makes demands that are beyond the capabilities of the state or any particular institution to respond. Certainly, the Mexican government can abrogate the expropriation decree (as they eventually did), but how does the government address the issue that the state conceives of its citizens as individuals? Without using the concept of citizenship rights, how did they converse with the state? With such a broad, elusive sense of themselves as a movement, how did they communicate specific demands? If their arguments were beyond the scope of the state, how did they expect their demands to be addressed and by whom? How did the state respond to address their claims? In short, how do the high ethical stances and dispositions outlined in the last two chapters manifest themselves in the Frente's specific, real-world strategies of communication and direct action?

The Frente have used what I call 'dramatic confrontations' to converse with the state and accomplish immediate goals, but I argue that these confrontations also had another, wider audience in mind. Dramatic confrontations provided a stage for the Frente and state agents to



communicate in literal, physical ways to each other and to interested onlookers. In this chapter, I show that the Frente used instances of visible, immediate, physical violence to represent and make visible large-scale structural violence. I will turn to the specifics of who makes up the audience of these dramatic confrontations in Chapter 6.

Rather than casting themselves as victims in these dramatic confrontations, the Frente chose to portray themselves in street theater, direct actions, and films as a strong and capable adversary imbued with moral authority. This casting helped them accomplish the specific, immediate goals that various levels of government were capable of responding to, but it also had more broad representational impacts. I argue that the Frente's use of dramatic confrontation was successful in four overlapping ways: it disrupted dominant narratives about an invincible state and the inevitability of neoliberal 'development'; it made the perpetrators of structural violence clearly visible; it gave agency to 'victims' of structural violence; and it left room for productive solutions. However, the strategy also had several disadvantages. By utilizing dramatic confrontation and representing themselves as strong adversaries, the Frente also made itself vulnerable to accusations that they *created* the conflict (rather than merely making an already existing violence visible). They also risked an escalation of physical state violence, something that came to fruition in May 2006.

The state (in the form of national and local governments) largely responded to the Frente's strategy by conceding to their immediate demands (Camacho Guzmán 2008). In 2006, local and state governments began to erect significant barriers again, and attempted to discipline the Frente. It did so by acting first through legal channels, and then through staging its own very visible dramatic confrontation. In this incident, state authorities created a spectacle of violence, using sexual assault and familial relationships to target members' relational selves. In making

itself visible as a perpetrator of structural, symbolic, and subjective violence, the state caused the largest upsurge in documentary films about Atenco.

I begin the chapter with a discussion of visual representations of structural violence. In order to illuminate how confrontation can be a productive means of representing structural violence, I contrast it with a strategy that makes use of images of sick and suffering bodies. I then discuss the primary symbol of the Frente, the machete, and how this symbol was used (on screen and off) during one political demonstration in Mexico City to create productive and visually compelling dramatic confrontations that benefit from the four characteristics listed above. I then turn toward the confrontation in 2006 in which an escalation of violence occurred. I argue that the state acted outside of its legal framework to discipline the collectivism so carefully cultivated by members of the Frente. I also conclude that the Frente's strategy of visual representation deeply challenged ideas of nonviolence and human rights even as they invoked these conceptions. I then bring the analysis back to the role of filmmaking. I argue that because the struggles of the Frente as well as the state's response are beyond the scope of citizenship rights and the state, filmmaking and dramatic confrontations that make structural violence visible are a more significant battleground in the Mexican context than policy and laws.

#### **4.1 MAKING STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE VISIBLE**

Understanding the ways that Atenguenses sought to use dramatic confrontation to make hidden violences visible requires specifying more clearly our conceptual approach to violence, generally, and structural violence specifically. Paul Farmer ties the origins of the term 'structural violence' to the origins of liberation theology in Latin America (2005: 8, 261 n13). Latin American clerics came together as early as 1968 to discuss how large-scale economic and social

structures came to mean that Latin America's poor and indigenous populations were disproportionately more susceptible to illness, disease, food shortages, military occupation, and general insecurity. They termed these economic and social consequences 'structural violence' to highlight the violent consequences of structural inequality. Farmer briefly defines the term as "a set of historically given and, often enough, economically driven conditions... [that] guarantee that violent acts will ensue" (2005: 9).

Zizek's (2008) conception of structural violence is very similar to Farmer's use of the term: social and economic structures and relations – poverty and disenfranchisement – that result in disproportionate benefits for some populations and disproportionate harm to others. Concerned with how violence of all kinds intersect with visibility however, Zizek (2008) fits his conception of structural violence in a larger schema of different forms of violence. First he juxtaposes 'objective violence' (structural and symbolic injustices) with 'subjective violence' ("violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent") (2008: 1). Within the category of objective violence, he makes a distinction between 'structural violence' and 'symbolic violence'. Symbolic violence refers to those discourses (racism, classism, sexism, homophobia) that treat some populations as less deserving. Zizek's conception of symbolic violence also echoes what Lynn Stephen, in the Mexican context, has described as "dominant representations of the dangerous, the subversive, the worthless, the marginal, and the unimportant...that allow them to be treated with less than human respect and dignity" (2000: 823).

Zizek distinguishes between objective and subjective violence to argue that objective violence is invisible to most people, even though it is at the root of most violence. Subjective violence (specific individuals hurting other specific individuals) is very visible, but is less significant. He argues that subjective violence is merely the visible evidence of objective

violence; by focusing on these acts, we obscure the larger economic and political forces at work that should be held accountable. In other words, in focusing on one police officer beating an ejidatario with his billy club, or even hundreds of police officers fighting hundreds of ejidatarios, we obscure the larger economic and political forces at work (poverty, disenfranchisement, consolidation of wealth, lack of democracy) that brought police and ejidatarios together to create this physical act of violence.

While agreeing with Zizek that subjective violence is merely symptomatic or indicative of deeper structural and symbolic violence, in this chapter I show that this relationship can be very useful to make (normally invisible) structural violence visible. Filmmakers and street performers use the visibility of subjective violence as an illustration and dramatic representation of unseen forces of structural and symbolic violence. It is very difficult to represent in a clear and concise way the myriad of subtle and frustrating ways that states and global economics can “conspire” (Farmer 2005: 40) to cause suffering for already marginalized populations. This causes a problem for social movements who wish to illuminate, communicate, and protest these subtle and unseen injustices. Police violence is a very clear and concise act of physical violence (subjective violence in Zizek’s conceptualization) that makes state violence (as one conduit of structural violence) clearly visible.

The violent act of a billy club coming down on someone’s head cannot encapsulate all of the forces of structural violence felt in Atenco, but it can be a visual representation, a symbol, even visual evidence, of these varied forces. The same can be said for physical scenes of confrontation that do not result in violence. A line of well-armed police preventing people from entering a government building or traveling down a city street are also a provocative and easily understandable visual representation of less visible barriers to democratic process and public

representation. Retaining officials (or temporarily sequestering against their will) government officials makes visible the bodies of individuals who erect and maintain the invisible structures of what Žižek terms objective violence. Instead of remaining silent and allowing the invisible pathways of structural violence to reproduce themselves, the Frente used confrontations to compel the state to respond, either opening pathways that were previously closed, or reinforcing them and creating visible evidence of structural violence. The state only builds a line of well-armed police surrounding a government building, for example, when there are people outside attempting to gain entry. I argue that the Frente used confrontation with authorities (not exclusively with police) as a tool of dramatic representation that made structural violence visible to a larger population, both within Atenco and in ever-widening circles of influence.

Confrontation as a strategy of dramatic representation (both on screen and off) has several advantages: it makes the perpetrators of structural violence clearly visible; it gives agency to ‘victims’ of structural violence; it disrupts dominant narratives about an invincible state and the inevitability of neoliberal ‘development’; and it leaves room for productive solutions. The advantages of confrontation come into sharper relief when compared to a more common and less disruptive strategy for representing structural violence, images of sick and suffering bodies.

Images of victimization are very familiar as visual representations of structural violence: Famines in Africa are represented by images of emaciated and deformed black children with bloated bellies, flies swarming their faces (Hicks 2011). The AIDS epidemic is represented by an image of a skeletal white man in a hospital gown staring off into space, his exposed limbs displaying dozens of dark purple lesions (Reininger 1986). Violence against women in Afghanistan is represented by the beautiful dark face of a teenage girl, framed by a veil and

marred by a hole where her nose has been cut off (Bieber 2010). Political and economic violence is represented by lines of corpses arranged on the sidewalk as a result of a military attack, a suicide bombing, or an industrial accident (AP 2012a , Doyle 2004, AP 2012b). The bodies in each of these images index a series of intersecting oppressions based on race, class, gender, and sexuality. An examination of the captions and articles accompanying the works cited above reveal that the journalists and artists that created images of these oppressed suffering bodies, did so with the well-being of the people they portrayed at heart. They wished to make their subjects' lives better through exposing the (classed, raced, gendered, and sexual) mechanisms at the root of the depicted suffering.

Building on Susan Sontag's (1977) argument that images of suffering can harden, rather than soften, the sympathies of viewers, Arthur and Joan Kleinman have criticized using images of suffering bodies to promote non-profit organizations:

One message that comes across from viewing suffering from a distance is that for all the havoc in Western society, we are somehow better than this African society. We gain in moral status and some of our organizations gain financially and politically, while those whom we represent, or appropriate, remain where they are, moribund, surrounded by vultures. This "consumption" of suffering in an era of so-called "disordered capitalism" is not so very different from the late nineteenth-century view that the savage barbarism in pagan lands justified the valuing of our own civilization at a higher level of development—a view that authorized colonial exploitation (Kleinman & Kleinman 1996).

Kleinman & Kleinman argue that images of suffering naturalize the victimization of already oppressed populations instead of illuminating the mechanisms or perpetrators of their oppression. In other words, images of suffering actually reinforce the hierarchies that photographers and filmmakers may have meant to criticize. Audiences in the Global North viewing images of suffering bodies in the Global South and connecting those bodies with suffering and violence at best communicates the idea that the suffering bodies need to be protected and saved. At worst, it

reproduces the idea that these bodies are worthless, inhuman, and wretched. Both reactions reproduce and naturalize the power and goodness of the colonizer, and the danger and disease of the colonized. In other words, images of sick and suffering bodies do not disrupt dominant narratives about the necessity and goodness of a strong state, or the inevitability and desirability of economic ‘development’.

Unfortunately, by exclusively depicting the connections between victims and suffering, these images conceal the perpetrators and mechanisms of structural violence. They are the visual equivalent of the common journalistic headline, “She was raped,” a phrase that feminists have criticized for over thirty years (Stanley & Robbins 1977, Penelope 1990, Meloy & Miller 2010). The passive voice erases the rapist from the story, transforming the victim/survivor into both the object and the subject of the violence. When looking for an explanation of how this could have happened, the reader has nowhere to look in the narrative other than to the victim herself. The phrase leads a reader to raise questions about what the victim could have been doing that contributed to the assault (What was she doing there? What was she wearing?). It locates all of the violence, the shame, and the danger of the rape in the suffering body of the victim rather than in the assailant.

Using images of suffering bodies to illustrate structural violence employs the visual grammar of the passive voice. The social, political, and economic mechanisms of structural violence (the perpetrators) are left out of frame. Such images make visible only the fact that these black bodies are starving, these queer bodies are sick, these female bodies are disfigured, and these poor bodies are wretched and suffering. These connections naturalize, rather than challenge, dominant narratives that marginalize the people depicted and they do not suggest that the populations depicted are capable of taking action to help themselves. In other words, images

of suffering bodies do not make visible the perpetrators of structural violence and do not give agency to the victims of structural violence.

Naturalizing these narratives means that images of victimization don't leave room for solutions to structural violence. Avni (2006) characterizes many of the films she helped to produce through WITNESS, an organization dedicated to documenting human rights abuses, this way:

I felt that the endless hours of footage featuring rumbling tanks, bombed-out buses, home demolitions, wailing parents, masked militants, shooting soldiers, and cries for revenge—those signature images broadcast regularly from the region—convey an overwhelming message to viewing audiences that the conflict is intractable, the populations militant and irreconcilable, and the situation beyond hope or help and even outside the realm of moral concern (Avni 2006: 209).

In short, she argues that continual images of victimization and suffering bodies may increase violence in the region and close off pathways toward resolution. After leaving WITNESS, she founded another filmmaking organization, Just Vision, that features everyday people as productive agents working toward peace.

Instead of using this framework of suffering and victimization, the Frente and its allied filmmakers have chosen to represent structural violence through what I will call 'dramatic confrontations' with representatives of the state. Unlike a strategy relying on victimization and suffering, I argue that this strategy draws perpetrators of structural violence into the frame as actors, and 'victims' are also given active roles. Instead of implying the need for a strong state to protect people, and the need for economic development or NGO programs to eradicate poverty, I argue that the Frente's dramatic confrontations disrupt dominant narratives that naturalize the benevolence and invincibility of the state and the inevitability (and desirability) of economic 'development'. Through portraying action and destabilizing dominant narratives, scenes of



confrontation also leave open the possibility for productive solutions, rather than the hopelessness that Kleinman & Kleinman and Avni portray.

In drawing attention to confrontation as a productive space for representation and investigation, I do not wish to confuse it with violence. Civil disobedience can be nonviolent and creates public confrontation that has many different possible outcomes, of which violence is a possibility, but not an inevitability. McAdams (1996) calls the dramatic staging of confrontation “strategic dramaturgy”. He argues that Martin Luther King, Jr. chose Birmingham, Alabama as a key site to stage acts of civil disobedience in 1963 because he knew that he could count on the Commissioner of Public Safety, ‘Bull’ Connor, to respond to acts of civil disobedience with violence and racism (McAdams 1996: 348). He writes:

The key lay in King’s ability to lure segregationists into acts of extreme racist violence while maintaining his followers’ commitment to nonviolence...The juxtaposition of peaceful black demonstrators and virulent white attackers created powerful and resonant images that triggered critically important reactions...The media were drawn to the drama inherent in the attacks (McAdams 1996: 354).

McAdams argues that as the civil rights movement moved north and no longer faced dramatic, public confrontations with racist authorities, the attention the movement had received and the political pressure that it created lessened significantly. In McAdams’ view, the violent reaction of Bull Connor was a productive outcome because it created instances of subjective violence that could visually represent generally invisible structural violence (discrimination against Black people) in national media. McAdam’s argument implies provocatively that it was violence (perpetrated by the police) that made Martin Luther King Jr.’s famously nonviolent strategy of civil disobedience effective.

McAdam’s argument complicates understandings of the relationship between nonviolence and violence, but the U.S. civil rights movement is a rare example of making

perpetrators of violence unambiguously visible. Gustafson (2009) presents a more complex case in which indigenous farmers in Bolivia attempted to hold a regional meeting of union members in 2008 and several farmers were killed. There were apparently no images of the attacks themselves, but afterward images of their dead bodies circulated through media sympathetic to indigenous movements as visible evidence of the structural violence in Bolivia. Gustafson describes the tone of these e-mails and articles:

The farmers of Pando were innocents who fell in the face of criminality. Their bodies call neither for emulation nor revenge, but revelation and justice. They were evidence, mute witnesses made to speak from death to reveal, *revelar*, a moral and social order that demanded to be made right (Gustafson 2009).

The images of dead bodies were visual evidence meant to reveal the structural violence perpetrated against Bolivian farmers, of which this violent incident was merely a symptom. Gustafson argues that the “dead bodies demand a narrative” and the violent killings made visually obvious that there were perpetrators. However, in contrast to a visual strategy of confrontation, the perpetrator was left out of the image. Gustafson shows that the narrative invoked by the images was ambiguous to different onlookers. To some e-mail recipients these murders made visible structural and subjective violence that prevented farmers from accessing political and economic resources. To others, the bodies of murdered farmers could simply equate them with criminality and violence.

The challenge for any social movement is to make visible structural violence and injustice in the most clear and unambiguous way possible, so that even those privileged populations who benefit from structural violence are confronted. If there is no confrontation then dominant narratives that normalize structural violence have not been disrupted and structural violence has not been made visible. However, it is difficult to create confrontations

that are representative of structural violence in productive ways; that do not harm the movement either through bodily injury or poor communication. The Frente has largely chosen to make the injustices and forms of structural violence against them visible through confrontations in which they face a minimal loss of life and are cast as strong and capable ‘victims’ of injustice. I now turn towards a more detailed examination of the Frente’s use of confrontation, using their primary symbol, the machete, as an entry point into a consideration of how to make perpetrators of structural violence unambiguously visible, give agency to ‘victims’, pose challenges to normative political and economic regimes, and work through the paradoxes of confrontational non-violence.

#### 4.2 MACHETES AND ARMED NONVIOLENCE

The campesino has to bring his machete. They say when they go to the fields, if a snake comes and doesn’t do anything to you, you let it go. But if it attacks, you give it the machete. [*Si no te hace nada, por allí lo dejas pasar. Pero si se te pone, pues, con el machete le das*] - Maria

The struggle that we have carried in San Salvador Atenco is a peaceful struggle. Where we proudly raise up our machete because our machete is clean. We have not killed anyone. We do not fire guns. With this we won, with the force of our pueblo. –Ana Maria

This machete does cut skin/Don’t come any closer fucking riot cop  
[*Este machete sí corta cuero/No te acerques pinche granadero*] - Political Slogan

For us the machete is a symbol that has won our battles. -Humberto

As the above quotes indicate, the central symbol of the struggle in Atenco has been the machete. Everywhere that the Frente went (starting in 2001, but continuing into my fieldwork in 2009) members brought with them a set of machetes. In 2009, these machetes were a set of six

or eight blades with orange plastic handles and political slogans written on them. They were kept in the Comisario Ejidal along with painted banners, and brought along to political events to be handed out to representatives of the Frente. People marched in political demonstrations with these machetes raised in the air and danced with machetes during political events. Even at roundtable discussions and panel presentations, there were moments where the few representatives of the Frente raised machetes into the air from behind conference tables and podiums.

Members of the Frente argue that the machete has been such a powerful symbol because it is an implement with rich historical and cultural connotations. They argue that the machete's strength as a political weapon lies its power as a visual symbol of Mexican *campesinos* [peasant farmers]. The force that it suggests visually is the force of a rural, undeveloped, and powerless pueblo of campesinos fighting with the meager tools available to them. The Frente carry machetes to communicate to onlookers that they are simple farmers using the tools available to them to fight oppression. They wish it to symbolize David's slingshot against the Goliath of the state and corporate capitalism. In short, they believe it to be a strong symbol because it is a weak weapon.

This mixture of connotation lies at the intersection of the issues of representation I raised above. The use of machetes (especially contrasted with the almost space-age technology of riot police) creates productive visual confrontations in street theater and films that makes visible perpetrators and mechanisms of structural violence. Their use gives agency to ejidatarios (victims of structural violence) through portraying them as capable adversaries, and destabilizes symbolic violence that naturalizes power and domination. Their use also has immediate, practical value in confrontations with authorities. However, the machete is also symbol that

challenges conceptions of virtuous, nonviolent behavior. By utilizing dramatic confrontation and representing themselves as strong adversaries, the Frente also has made itself vulnerable to accusations that they *created* conflict (rather than merely making an already existing violence visible). They also have risked an escalation of violence rather than simply making violence visible. Because of these representational challenges, machetes are a productive entry point to an examination of visibility and structural, symbolic, and subjective forms of violence.

In these dramas of violence and visibility, machetes play out in immediate contexts with authorities, in street theater, and on screens with very little distinction amongst these various stages. My friend Maria mentioned in previous chapters, for instance, knows that in dressing as an *adelita* (a revolutionary woman soldier) and carrying a machete in political marches, she is performing for people around her in the street as well as unknown publics who will see her image in a variety of contexts, including newspaper images, television coverage, and documentary films. All Atenco films rely heavily on the street theater and confrontations that are provided to them organically in demonstrations and direct actions. As such, I treat these performances as members of the Frente conceive of them: performances that exist simultaneously on screens and off.

I came to Atenco after spending six months in Mexico City working primarily with urban film producers who were sympathetic to the Frente. They argued that a significant challenge for the Frente has been the commercial media's representation of them, and their use of machetes, as violent. These urban supporters vehemently denied that the machete was in any way a weapon, and instead emphasized that the machete was a farm implement, nothing more. Their view was that negative portrayal in the media constructed the idea of the machete as a weapon, but that this was simply not true<sup>11</sup>.

Arriving in Atenco, I expected people from the Frente to assert the same sentiment, that machetes are farm implements and not weapons. However, as the quotes above indicate, this was far from what I encountered. There was even some anger expressed at the idea that the machete might be an unfortunate or confusing symbol. Most people in Atenco found it the perfect symbol exactly *because* it was a weapon *as well as* a farm implement. Their frustration came in the news media's insistence that because they carried a farm implement/weapon, they were violent. Unlike their urban sympathizers, members of the Frente did not see a necessary connection between carrying weapons and being violent. As in the quotations from the epigraph above, they insisted that yes, the machete is a weapon; yes, it is very useful in police confrontations; yes, its power as a symbol lies in its suggestion of force. But, at the same time, we are a peaceful movement and the machete is a peaceful symbol. How can these two ideas exist simultaneously? What can symbolic and physical uses of the machete in political protests tell us about making different forms of confrontation and violence visible?

Humberto's narrative of how the Frente came to use the machete illustrates how the suggestion of force might lead to peaceful resolution. The narrative is long, but in its entirety touches on all of the layers of meaning and utility that the machete represents, and is a narrative that I will continue to refer to for the remainder of the chapter. In his narrative it was the suggestion of force that won protestors a peaceful business meeting with government officials and resolved a conflict.

In '95 the riot police [granaderos] entered [Atenco] for the first time - and it was when they beat us, they beat us with clubs [*nos garrotean*] – so at that time, I said to my *compadre* Nacho. I said, “Oye, compadre, if each one [of us] bought a machete and we went to the march with machetes, the government would think twice.” Why? Because where we hit with the machete, a scar will stay for someone's whole life. And the granaderos won't enter so hard. And my compadre said no. He said no because it is a sharp weapon [*arma blanca*]. And

it's true; it is an arma blanca. But also, for us, it is a work implement. The campesino that doesn't have a machete is not a campesino. ... And as I go to all of the states [for my work], on one occasion I came to Ciudad Valles. ... I get to the center and there is a demonstration of the sugar workers. They make sugar there, but they didn't want to give them a raise. And the poor things were all sitting there. And all of these people were carrying their machete[s] because they are sugar workers ... It cuts [sugar] cane. They were there demonstrating, there sitting nicely, not yelling or anything. ... I met one of the compañeros that I know and I asked, "What's going on? What are they doing here? Are they fighting or what?" And then he told me, he said, "No, they don't want to give us a raise." ... I told him, "And what, did the commission already go in, or what?" He said, "No, nobody has entered. No." "Well, let's yell at them," I said, "We're going to yell and with these machetes that everyone has, well, we can make a goddamn revolution, sons of bitches [*puede hacer una pinche revolución, cabrones*]. [Humberto laughs.] ... And we begin to yell and everything and when the president of *gobernación* realized, he came out shortly. ... That same day the situation was solved. They gave them a raise. ... And that was when I came back here [to Atenco] with the machete.

In Humberto's narrative, the difference between the workers getting paid more for their sugar cane and prices staying the same lay in a slightly more confrontational demonstration style. McAdams (1996) argues that social movement scholarship has what he terms an "ideational bias," or too much concentration on "speeches, writings, statements, or other formal ideological pronouncements by movement actors...Encoded in a group's actions and tactics are a good many messages, but none more significant than the degree of threat embodied in the movement" (1996: 341). In Humberto's narrative, the single factor standing between the sugar cane workers and their raise was the degree of threat that they represented to government officials. Increasing the degree of threat was very effective for them, and has been very effective for the Frente on numerous occasions in accomplishing specific, concrete goals. The Frente has found that in the Mexican context, direct confrontation with a degree of threat (not to be confused with actual, physical violence) simply works. It works to break down physical and bureaucratic barriers erected to keep marginalized groups out of legal and economic processes.

Atenco has earned a name for itself for using the suggestion of force, and through this suggestion, has often gained what is normally ensured to middle and upper class Mexicans. On occasions when a government official would not give them an appointment, they have gathered up forty people and simply opened his door and demanded to meet immediately. When they couldn't meet with the director of the construction company who was digging up ejido land, they detained the workers and demanded that the boss present himself. When a new toll highway was built from their region to Mexico City but the toll was judged too expensive, they routinely simply drove through booths without paying. These tactics have little respect for "normal" government processes. However, from the perspective of many members of the Frente, these "normal" processes have been set up precisely to exclude them from using them. It is the closed door, the lack of communication, the tollbooth, the arbitrary arrest, that are invisible "normal" processes of structural violence that the Frente make visible through these very practical and immediate confrontations.

Members of the Frente have also found it very effective for the purpose that Humberto originally mentions: to decrease the level of police violence against protestors. The political slogan mentioned above (This machete does cut skin/Don't come any closer fucking riot cop) seems quite aggressive, but behind its confrontational nature is a threat that questions the police's authority to use violence against protestors. An 'ideational' approach might be for protestors to question the state's monopoly on the use of force, or argue against the legitimacy of the state because of its use of force against citizens. The suggestion of power that machetes evoke makes both of these arguments provocatively and visually because it is a weak weapon imbued with the practical authority of a wholesome campesino.



The machete also has insurmountable disadvantages as a weapon of brute force. While the Frente may carry machetes, the police have full body armor, billy clubs, plastic shields, tear gas guns, rubber bullets, tanks that shoot water and acid at high pressures, helicopters, and although they don't frequently use them, automatic weapons. Even unarmed officials that the Frente has confronted (both government workers and employees working for large multinational corporations) have the capacity to mobilize these forces through government channels. Against this kind of power and these weapons, machetes are merely a symbolic suggestion of force. They are little more effective than a rock picked up on the street. Even when speaking with admiration about the damage that a machete can do in his narrative above, Humberto does not speak of killing someone, but of giving them a scar to remind them of the incident. Even this scar does not prevent the policeman from attacking again, only making him think twice about hitting so hard.

The threat that the machete evokes, coupled with its inefficiency as an actual weapon, illuminates a deeper threat that machetes pose. The use of machetes disrupts a social order that equates campesinos with powerlessness and disenfranchisement. It also makes immediate solutions to structural violence painfully clear: open this door, give us a meeting, don't assault me. It is this visual, symbolic disruptive capacity of machetes that makes them a threat much beyond their physical capacity to do any damage against bodies or property.

Also apparent in Humberto's narrative of the sugar cane workers, is his complete disregard with what yelling and waving machetes will look like to an outside audience. He is only concerned with its immediate (and effective) impact on the government officials. Returning to McAdam's (1996) conceptualization of strategic dramaturgy above, he argues that Dr. King's strategy was so effective because it coupled making violent racism visible with the innocence

and nonviolence of protestors. This juxtaposition invited onlookers to sympathize with protestors. McAdam's argument draws attention to the very influential presence of the unknown reactions of third-party onlookers: a complex amalgam of 'outsiders' including sympathizers, non-sympathizers, national publics, and international ones. Both movements and authorities are keenly aware that the opinions of these audiences can have dramatic consequences that change the outcome of confrontations considerably.

How these publics interpret social movement/state confrontations and how they intervene as political actors is an influential but infinitely complex process that is very difficult (if not impossible) to know. What *is* knowable, and easily accounted for, are how political actors take into account their *own* perceptions of an imagined public's interpretations of confrontation. In other words, although I cannot speak for how 'public opinion' has figured into the outcomes of the Frente's efforts, I can speak for how members of the Frente changed their practices and strategies to play to their own heterogeneous conceptions of 'public opinion'.

Although Humberto was unconcerned about public opinion in the situation with the sugarcane workers above, complex notions of public opinion do come into play for the Frente's strategies generally. Performances for outside audiences are clear in the documentary films of a defining march that occurred on November 14, 2001 (Berger 2001, Díaz 2001, FPDT 2001). The Frente travelled to Mexico City in a caravan including tractors, horses, wagons, small ceremonial cannons, loud bottle rockets called *cuetes*, and dozens of machetes. None of these vehicles is a usual way of traveling within Atenco, and cannons, machetes, and fireworks are implements that appear on ceremonial occasions, not during the course of everyday life. This form of visual representation reveals the desire to communicate a certain image of the Frente that would

juxtapose visually and performatively with the city streets, foreign compact cars, and cosmopolitan inhabitants of Mexico City.

On the outskirts of Mexico City, police blocked their way, arguing that they could not bring their tractors, horses, and machetes into the streets of Mexico City. The Frente attempted to pass on through, adamant that they should be allowed straight to the center plaza of Mexico City just as they were. There was a clash with police, generating striking images of futuristic-looking policemen in plastic body armor and helmets using their billy clubs as swords against ejidatarios on horseback with machetes. The Frente broke through the police line and travelled on to the city center to protest<sup>12</sup>.

I argue that on this occasion, several normative hierarchies and inequalities, things that most privileged urban Mexicans take for granted, were dramatized and made visible. First, the juxtaposition of horses in the streets of Mexico City made visible, in a compelling and dramatic way, the large disparities between rural and urban life in Mexico. It is one thing to know that there are urban and rural spaces in the country, but quite another to see these different aspects of Mexico juxtaposed together in one image. The juxtaposition was all the more dramatic for inverting the way that these two ideas are generally juxtaposed visually. Images that naturalize and celebrate 'development' are likely to show the intrusion of urbanity into rural areas. These images showed an intrusion of a proud and strong rurality into an urban area.

Second, authorities blocking the entry of tractors and horses dramatized the lack of access that the rural poor have to political influence and economic decision-making. The invisible legal and economic barriers that prevent the rural poor from participating in democratic process, or economic 'development' plans were dramatized visually by a line of uniformed police physically barring entry to the city.

These two dramatic confrontations would have made for a successful demonstration. The fact that the Frente won the skirmish however, disrupted an idea of the state and ‘development’ as all-powerful and insurmountable forces. This dramatic confrontation disrupted dominant narratives about an invincible state and the inevitability of the neoliberal ‘development’ of the airport. It portrayed the state as capable of being defeated, destabilizing symbolic violence that naturalizes power and domination. It also left room for solutions by portraying ‘victims’ of the state and neoliberal globalization as powerful agents capable of making a difference and changing the outcome.

For the Frente and its allies, machetes have come to symbolize all of these disruptions and productive confrontations. However, this symbolism is a double-edged sword (so to speak). The machete can invoke the moral authority of an innocent, simple people who work the land and are fighting against the odds to cease being exploited. This is the image of what Claudio Lomnitz calls “good pueblo” (2001: 65): people deserving of citizenship rights because they are good, honest, and innocent. But the machete can also be taken for the negative aspects of this same population: barbaric, uneducated, backward peasants. This is what Lomnitz calls “bad pueblo,” or people who are not deemed worthy of citizenship rights because they are violent troublemakers. In using machetes, the Frente is invoking the danger and irrationality of this authentic rural Mexico as well as its earthy, genuine qualities. It is in the idea of “bad pueblo” that we can see the narrative ambiguity of machetes.

The headlines I presented in Chapter 2 illustrate how different media exploit both sides of this image. *The Jornada* headline reads, “Atenco on guard”. The *Vertigo* headline reads, “Atenco Again: They assault the rule of law”. The grammar of the *Jornada* article placed ‘Atenco’ in a defensive position, making visible the violence of the state (named in the body of

the article) and Atenco's virtuous position of moral authority. The *Vertigo* headline cast 'Atenco' as the active aggressor who created the conflict and the state as the defensive actor that attempted to re-establish order. This is the battle of dramatic symbolism that the Frente finds itself in, and in which the large body of sympathetic documentary films intervene. These films (as well as other solidary media) attempt to make visible the violence of the state and combat the idea that the Frente created the violence. These films (as well as other solidarity media) attempt to make visible – and make meaningful, within their own narrative frame – the violence of the state and combat the idea that the Frente created the violence.

If the Frente had simply left their machetes at home, as Lopez Obrador (then mayor of Mexico City) asked them to do in 2002 (Garcia-Duran 2001), one might speculate that the Frente would not be stuck in the difficult space between 'good pueblo' and 'bad pueblo'. However, it is precisely because the machete places them in this difficult space that the Frente's street theater and direct actions have been so productive. If they fit neatly into either of these archetypal categories, they would not have been disrupting dominant narratives. The dangerous ambiguity of the machete is precisely how the Frente continues to make national headlines more than ten years after the march described above.

Because of this disruption, machetes challenge Lomnitz's framework based on differential citizenship rights. The difference between good pueblo and bad pueblo is the degree to which they are deferential to the state. Rights are given to those who are deferential and not to those who are rebellious. The use of machetes shows very clearly that this is not so. On November 14, the Frente gained access to the capital not because they were deferential and so were benevolently given citizenship rights to protest, but because they overpowered the police. Use of machetes pose a direct challenge to the state's authority to delegate citizenship rights by

simply taking them by force. This force is a very specific form however, based on the moral authority of the symbolic and pragmatic relationship between humans and agricultural lands, and a folksy pragmatism that cuts through nonsensical bureaucracy.

As the November 14 march reveals, the machete began as a symbol that invoked a very specific form of moral authority tied to classed identifications of campesinos. How then, has the machete come to be a symbol of the identity-less general commitment to collectivity and moral economy that the Frente professed in 2009? This happened through the intensive organizational effort during and after the airport struggle to articulate the struggle of Atenco with other social movements and potential allies from around the world. In an incident indicative of this effort, eighteen American college students were encouraged to hold machetes in a march to Mexico City on May 1, 2002 (AP 2002). They were quickly deported under article 43 of Mexico's constitution that outlaws foreign participation in political demonstrations. In 2009, I observed that most allies invited to Frente events were ceremoniously presented with machetes as part of the event. Taking up a machete has become symbolic of joining with the Frente in a confrontational struggle against neoliberalism across class, race, gender, and ethnic identifications.

This use of machetes reveals the importance of the difference between my use of 'self' and 'identity' from the last chapter. The celebrities in the image above cannot convincingly identify themselves as campesino members of the Frente in the press. They can however, pick up a machete and identify themselves as *compañeros* of the Frente who are cultivating a certain set of political, economic, and ethical practices. The machete symbolizes both taking up these practices, and the confrontational nature of doing so.

In summary, machetes became symbolic of using dramatic confrontation to forcefully accomplish specific political goals and to make visible mechanisms of structural violence. The machete dramatically casts victims of structural violence as a strong and capable adversary imbued with moral authority. I argue that the Frente's use of dramatic confrontation was very successful at disrupting dominant narratives about an invincible, benevolent state and the inevitability of neoliberal 'development'. It left room for solutions by portraying 'victims' of the state and neoliberal globalization as powerful agents capable of making a difference. However, the strategy also had disadvantages. By utilizing dramatic confrontation and representing themselves as strong adversaries, the Frente also made itself vulnerable to the narrative ambiguity that they *created* the conflict (rather than merely making an already existing violence visible). They also risked an escalation of violence, something that came to fruition in May 2006. I turn now to an analysis of this incident.

#### **4.3 REPRESSION**

How did the state respond to the Frente's illustrative confrontations and insistence on collectivity? To a surprising degree, from 2002-2006 local, state, and federal governments conceded to the demands of the Frente, forming a local government that Camacho Gúzman (2008) has termed a "coalition government". In 2006 however, the state began to act to stop these extralegal political processes. Using the framework of individual criminality, warrants were made for the arrest of individuals for acts of civil disobedience. When this strategy became (almost immediately) problematic, the state moved outside of its legal structures to punish the Frente in a collective way through violent acts, including sexual assault, that operate on a collective, moral, and relational level. This violence forcefully reproduced (and made painfully

visible) many of the social, cultural, and legal structures of violence that the Frente had been disrupting. The sudden glaring examples of subjective violence caused the largest upsurge in documentary films about Atenco. These documentaries used the physical violence to represent larger structural violence perpetrated by the state. However, they also tended to uncritically characterize the confrontation within a human rights framework of victimization, a framework many members of the Frente were skeptical of, and a framework that did not benefit from the representational advantages of the Frente's dramatic confrontations.

In 2006, the Frente was aiding a variety of local groups with their legal difficulties. One of these local issues involved a group of vendors from the Belasario Dominguez market in the nearby city of Texcoco. This market is a common style in which vendors rent small spaces in a large open building to sell whatever they choose. Other vendors who did not rent stalls frequently congregated on the sidewalk outside the market and in the passageways. This situation is not at all unusual in Mexico, but the local police in Texcoco had begun to harass some flower vendors who sold their flowers on the sidewalk outside of the market. Rumors were circulating that the city was attempting to 'clean up' the market in preparation for selling it to a large supermarket chain<sup>13</sup>. A group of the flower sellers and some rent-paying vendors came to the Frente to ask for their help, and the Frente was advising them on appropriate actions and supporting them in getting meetings with the appropriate government offices.

The possibility of selling the market affected everyone renting stalls at the market, but the flower vendors seemed especially disturbed by the displacement. May 3rd is an important Catholic holiday in Mexico, The Day of the Holy Cross, in which everyone decorates crosses with flowers. Because everyone needs flowers, it is one of the most lucrative days of the year for flower vendors. On May 2nd, the Frente and the florists had a meeting with the state



government. There had been a confrontation or two between the police and the florists, and in one confrontation the florists successfully chased off the police. The conditions seemed favorable for the florists, and video footage from this conference (Colectivo Klamvé 2006) shows that the government agreed to allow the florists to sell their flowers outside the market from 4:00 am until 11:00 am the next day.

When the vendors and some people from the Frente arrived at the market in the morning, it was surrounded by police. There were some skirmishes between the vendors and police, and the central group of organizers retreated to a house down the street and took refuge on the roof. The authorities had arrest warrants from previous incidents of civil disobedience for many of the people who came to the market that morning. It was an ambush, not so much for the florists, but for members of the Frente who were identified as leaders in two previous incidents, including Ignacio del Valle. Around five o'clock in the afternoon, police entered the house in Texcoco and arrested everyone inside, throwing them down the stairs from where they were sequestered on the roof.

I have kept Lourdes's narrative of this incident almost entirely intact to convey a sense of how violence entered people's lives on this day in 2006. She did not experience any physical violence against her person, and yet through her husband and family, she was deeply affected. For Lourdes, the day is bound to the celebration of the Day of the Holy Cross, the safety of her family, her daughter's wedding, and her son's coming of age. Television, and the experience of the event through media, also plays a large role in her experience. As she told me this story, her husband Emilio sat beside her, blowing into his hands to keep from crying.

This day we had a commitment in the church of the pueblo, because this day is a pueblo festival day. ... I didn't leave the church until about one thirty or two o'clock. ... When I was entering the house, I saw a helicopter go by. And then I

saw that another came on the other side. And I said to them, “Children, your father hasn’t arrived?” “No, mama,” they said, “He hasn’t come.” And something told me, I don’t know. I said, “Turn on the television please.” When my daughter turned on the television, it was the most terrible impression that we could have had. Because in that moment when we turned it on, he [indicating her husband] appeared on the television, obviously along with all of the people, Señor Ignacio, with all of the people who were on the roof, everyone like this [raises her hand] with the machete. ... It was really terrible. Terrible. ... The helicopters passed over and over, and I said, “My God”. The only thing that we did was to close ourselves in and be watching. Because all day the television was there, all day long. All day. So, yes, it was very sad. Very sad because of the helplessness of those of us inside. ... When they took them out of the house there in Texcoco in the way that they did and everything. I remember that when- the news was there that said, “In this moment Ignacio del Valle is being detained and all of the people that are with him and everything”- and they erased the image. They put the television black, in stripes. Because they didn’t allow showing the way that they were beating them. So my children began to cry. And I remember that I held them and I told them, “Don’t cry. Don’t cry, children. Finally your father is living an experience that your father has dreamed of. And we have to be strong because he is living one of his dreams.” ... In this moment, the life of my son took a tremendous turn ... He took it so to heart, because everyone arrived and said, “There’s nothing else to do, Juanito. Keep your chin up. [*Échale ganas*]. Now you are the man of the house.” Imagine that they had said these words to my son. Do you have an idea of- to what extent it could have damaged my son when they said these words? [Her voice breaks and she begins to cry] ... Our daughter, the eldest, was- imagine. They got him May 3rd. Her wedding was May 13th. May 13th. So yes, it was very difficult. It was very difficult.

Lourdes’s narrative reveals two very important aspects of the violence that I will return to below. First, she expresses the pain and disruption of the day through proxies: her son’s coming-of-age, her daughter’s wedding. This is important because it demonstrates how the violence rippled outward to affect the entire community. She was not personally a victim of any single act of violence against her individual body, and yet she was deeply affected by the violence because it disrupted important familial relationships. She relates this pain not through expressing how the violence affected herself (seeing her husband attacked and arrested on live television), but how it affected her children and their relationships to their father and the family. Also important to her narrative is her experience of watching the violence on television. In her account, the

television represents an unmediated experience of the violence, only intruding into her experience when the images are erased, never when they were shown. Television coverage was the primary way that people in Atenco and people throughout the nation experienced the violence on May 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>. These are both themes that I will return to below.

As the scene Lourdes narrates developed, Atenquenses blocked the highway alongside Atenco several miles away to protest the imminent capture of their *compañeros* in Texcoco. Around three o'clock in the afternoon, just about the time that national television news is broadcast, the situation on the highway escalated. Police shot and killed a fifteen year-old boy. He was not a boy who was fighting with the Frente. In fact, his family was not with the Frente at all. He merely found some police hiding and was shot through the chest with one bullet. With this news, the confrontations with police became more violent.

The narrative ambiguity of the body of this boy and how he died became evidence for multiple media versions of the day's events and became a major point of contention in the media. The head of the state police announced that the boy had died from an impact with a firework, such as the Frente uses during marches and festivals. Commercial media tended to report this version of events (See Sosa 2006, for example). Independent media (and eventually the National Human Rights Commission) invariably cited the father of the boy, the image of the deceased boy's chest showing a small hole, and an autopsy report citing that the boy was killed with a 38 caliber bullet, the same gauge as the police carry (Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos 2006: 15).

The national television coverage of the day concentrated on the skirmishes between Atenquenses and police on the highway outside of Atenco. News helicopters mingled with police helicopters in the air over Atenco, and local people burned tires on the highway to obscure

their view of the ground. People overturned and burned cars to keep the traffic from trying to come through the section of highway. Images recorded from above showed groups of men with machetes chasing police officers and throwing rocks at them. They also showed an image which later became quite famous among the Frente as doing a lot of damage to the credibility of the movement. In it, a group of three or four men approach a policeman in riot gear lying face up on the pavement. He appears to be unconscious. One of the men takes a few rapid steps toward the policeman and kicks him full force in the groin (Canalseisdejulio & Promedios 2006).

In the early morning hours of May 4<sup>th</sup>, Atenco found itself in the midst of many urban and international sympathizers who populated barricades at the entrances to the town from the highway. At around four o'clock in the morning, thousands of police officers entered the town, beating and arresting everyone that they encountered in the street at that hour. They entered many different houses, pulling people out of their homes, beating them, and loading them onto police trucks (Organización Mundial Contra la Tortura 2007). Some of the visitors hid themselves successfully in local houses. Others were found. A total of 207 people were arrested (Gudiño Pelayo 2009: 10), some who were part of the movement, others who were not. Five arrested foreigners were deported (Gudiño Pelayo 2009: 15). In addition to the young man who died of a bullet wound, a young man from Mexico City was hit forcefully on the head with a teargas container and was in a delicate condition (Gibler 2009). He later died.

Police piled prisoners first onto police trucks, then into police busses. During the six hour trip from Atenco to Santiaguito prison (a trip that usually only takes half that time), police beat, raped, and terrorized detainees. Several people who were on these trucks testified in films that they were told they were going to be killed (Canalseisdejulio 2006, Klamvé 2006). Both men and women testified to documentarians that they were sexually assaulted on the way to

prison and in prison (Klamvé 2006). One member of the Frente told me that he and a large group of men were told that they were going to be raped. The following is a representative testimony recorded in a human rights report of the incident. The survivor is a young woman from Mexico City.

I was detained in a private house in San Salvador Atenco that was raided by the Federal Preventative Police. [...] Inside [the police bus] there was a great number of people in handcuffs and with heads covered piled one on top of another. They put me on top of the pile and then grabbed me by the seat of my pants. There, one policeman put his hand in my blouse and ripped my brassier, then put his hand in my pants and ripped my underwear. I found myself face down with my face covered. They lowered my pants to my ankles and my blouse to my head, hitting my buttocks hard, yelling that they would rape me and kill me. Then a police yelled at me to call him “cowboy” [*vaquero*] and hit my buttocks with more violence, but now with his billy club. He only stopped when he heard what he had asked. Right after that, he penetrated my vagina with his fingers and squeezed my breasts hard. [...] I traveled the whole way [to the prison] naked on top of two other people and another policeman rode sitting on my back and head. (OMCT 2007: 69, my translation)

Stephen, in her (2000) discussion of sexual violence against indigenous populations in Chiapas reiterates the findings of Human Rights Watch that sexual violence “has been deployed as a tactical weapon to terrorize civilian communities” (Human Rights Watch 1995: 1-2). A recent UN Security Council resolution on women, peace and security notes that sexual violence is often used “as a tactic of war to humiliate, dominate, instill fear in, disperse and/or forcibly relocate civilian members of a community or ethnic group” (UN Security Council 2008: 1). Stephen adds that the detention and rape (even the threat of rape) of men is a feminizing and demoralizing form of torture made to make men feel helpless. Aretxaga argues that the sexual violence against women prisoners in Northern Ireland was “a sign of an excess which, being intrinsic to the reality of the state, cannot be contained by its symbolics of purposeful rationality” (2005: 105).

Building on Aretxaga and Stephen's arguments that sexual violence is used to humiliate and demoralize rather than rationally discipline, I argue that the violence of May 4<sup>th</sup> specifically targeted the moral, relational, collectivist self that members had come to cultivate and value as a result of their participation in the Frente. The confrontation on the highway made clear that the arrest of individual citizens was clearly not a comprehensive way of disciplining (or even destroying) the Frente. I previously quoted Virgilio as saying that states have difficulty conceiving of a movement without leaders and orders. Systematically targeting people's relationships and sexuality reveals an alarming recognition of the importance of relational, moral selves to the political power of the Frente. It is revealing that the state acted outside of legal frameworks to do so.

In his narrative presented in Chapter 3, Beto says that he was prepared to give his life and accept physical punishment to preserve his commitment to collectivity and the integrity of his family, the Frente, and Atenco. It is in this same spirit of sacrifice, even martyrdom that Lourdes says above that her husband was "living one of his dreams" as he was arrested as part of the Frente<sup>14</sup>. In Beto's case however, the police not only targeted him, they targeted his elderly in-laws also residing in the house. Humberto escaped capture in 2006 even though (according to him) there was a warrant out for his arrest. He told me that in his absence, police sexually assaulted his wife and teenage daughter, an incident that resulted in being permanently estranged from his family. Lourdes's narrative above, in expressing her pain exclusively through her children's relationship to their father, also articulates her experience of the violence as an assault against her interdependent, relational self.

#### 4.4 HUMAN RIGHTS DOCUMENTARIES

In contrast to the collective aspect of the violence, the outpouring of documentary films of the violence overwhelmingly framed the incident as an attack on individual human rights and bodily integrity. The subjective violence of the attack fit easily into a human rights framework and was quite successfully constructed as such through transnational social movement networks and international and national juridical systems. At least three of these films were released within six weeks of the incident, *Romper el Cerco* [*Breaking the Siege*] (Canalseisdejulio & Promedios 2006), *Atenco, un Crimen de Estado* [*Atenco, a Crime of the State*] (Kolectivo Klamvé 2006), and *Seis Testimonios* [*Six Testimonies*] (Anonymous 2006). Other documentaries trickled out over the next many years, including *Todos Somos Atenco* [*We are all Atenco*] (IndyMedia Mexico, Date unknown), *Atenco a Dos Años* [*Atenco Two Years Later*] (Kolectivo Klamvé 2008), *Llamado Urgente por la Justicia* [*Urgent Call for Justice*] (Centro Agustín Pro DH, 2008), *Atenco, la Sentencia Detrás de la Sentencia* [*Atenco, the Sentence Behind the Sentence*] (Kolectivo Klamvé 2009), and *Presos Politicos Libertad* [*Free Political Prisoners*], (Campaign for Justice and Freedom for Atenco 2009). In direct contrast to the practices and visual frameworks of the early films, all of these films make use of a human rights framework in their analysis of the violence. Two of the films mentioned above (*Llamado Urgente por la Justicia*, and *Presos Politicos Libertad*) were partially produced by Human Rights NGOs. *Llamado Urgente* was made to present before the Inter-American Council as evidence of human rights abuses. *Romper el Cerco* and *Atenco, un Crimen de Estado* were also, according to one of the lawyers involved in the case, entered as evidence of human rights abuses to the Supreme Court<sup>15</sup>.

All of the films tend toward depicting and enumerating the horrors of state violence. They use specific incidences of physical, subjective violence to represent structural violence. They also name and make perpetrators of abuses visible. However, rather than breaking with ideas of an invincible state and helpless victims of violence, these films overwhelmingly reiterate the danger of the state and the victimization of its vulnerable citizens. They challenge the state's authority to the extent that they show it to be a perpetrator of horrific physical violence, but they also reinforce ideas that the state is invincible.

These films played a very valuable role for the Frente and for its allies around the world who wished to hold governments accountable to protecting, rather than oppressing, their citizens. This less radical message made these films much more easily consumable to more mainstream international and Mexican audiences. The human rights framework and the clear violations of human rights perpetrated in Atenco made the various levels of violence clearly visible, even to those who benefit from structural violence. The extreme nature of the violence made the state into an unambiguous perpetrator and the Frente into a much more defensible entity. In this sense, the films were very successful in making structural violence visible. However, in concentrating almost exclusively on abuses, these films didn't leave much room for solutions that challenged, rather than reinforced, hierarchies of domination. In short, the human rights framework of these films lost much of the representational advantages that the Frente had developed since 2001 and I describe above (giving active roles to 'victims', destabilizing the invincibility of the state and inevitability of neoliberal globalization, and leaving room for productive solutions).

I do not suggest that these films should not have been made, or should not have enumerated, quantified, or described police abuses. However, I do argue that the nature of the



violence and the ease with which it fell into a human rights framework made it very easy for filmmakers to fall into the representational pitfalls of depicting suffering bodies and victimization without considering how they might have been reproducing, rather than destabilizing, hierarchies of domination and control.

It is significant that none of these documentaries was produced by any of the same individuals who made films about the Frente during the airport struggle<sup>16</sup>. There is also a surprising lack of testimony in these films from members of the Frente. The vast majority of testimonies are from supporters of the Frente who came from Mexico City to protect Atenco in barricades. My own conversations and interviews with members of the Frente reveal that part of this lack of involvement had to do with fear of retribution and the demoralization of the attacks. However, these interviews also reveal a reticence to enumerate the abuses of the attacks for their own sake. In 2009 people simply didn't want to talk about abuses; they preferred to try and forget them. They preferred to place narrative emphasis on the role of the government and the police rather than their victimization. This is a subtle, but important distinction. One criticizes the actions of the perpetrators, placing blame firmly on the shoulders of police and different levels of government (local, state, and national). The other highlights victimization by unknown assailants. The two cannot be separated, and yet (as I have argued above) there are important implications for challenging or reproducing symbolic violence in this subtle distinction<sup>17</sup>.

Another difference between the human rights framework of these films and the Frente's representational strategy is the degree to which these films concentrate on abuses against individual bodies rather than the Frente as a collective, or the community of Atenco as a whole. I do not criticize the human rights framework here to suggest that members of the Frente did not sometimes use this framework to understand and bring to justice the attack, or that it has not

been useful in doing so. The human rights framework has been very helpful on both of these accounts. I criticize it to highlight an aspect of people's experiences and the Frente's battles against neoliberal 'development' that this framework has difficulty capturing. This is the extra-legal, collectivist aspect of the members' arguments against neoliberalism, and their experiences of the 2006 repression.

Lourdes's human rights, for example, were not violated. She does not cite her bodily integrity, or even economic or political rights as victims of the violence. Instead she locates her personal pain (to the extent that she expresses personal pain) as a relationship between her children and their father. Neither does she express the physical brutality against her husband under a rubric of victimization. Instead, she describes him as "living one of his dreams". This is a sharp contrast to the testimony of the young woman from Mexico City, who concentrates specifically on the physical abuses against her bodily integrity and does not locate herself in a web of relationships, or her experience of the abuses as anything other than personal physical trauma. Members of the Frente have certainly used physical abuses as evidence, and a framework of rights to describe structural violence. However, their moral framework of dramatic confrontation overflows a conceptualization of individual citizenship or human rights.

I return here to Ana Maria's words, partially presented previously:

The repression has marked our pueblo, our history, but it is one more piece of evidence of the fear that the powerful have, that the government has of not reaching their goals, and the only thing that occurs to them is to repress. They can take our lives, they can hurt us a lot. But what they can't take from us is the truth [*la razon*]. And that is like a seed that we pass from generation to generation. And I think that this fight is eternal. I think that there will always be people who carry this seed of dignity, of force, of love of the truth, love of the land, *love of their rights*. So to a certain point there is something useless, absurd to try to exterminate those who try to lift their voices. It is absurd. I have the hope, the faith, that there are always more people here and in the world that won't stand for it. I think that sooner or later we will reach something different. This is going to

change. We can't let the absurd dominate, this dumb idea of exploitation, of *dominio*, domination. The human dignity can't anymore. [Emphasis added.]

Ana Maria uses the conception of rights here, but does not invoke it as a relationship between governments and citizens or as a guarantee of individual autonomy and bodily integrity. Instead, rights are one small part of a larger argument about human dignity and the absurdity of hierarchical relationships. Rights are not located within the individual as his/her own, but as a seed that is passed down from generation to generation. Even though she portrays the government as powerful and capable of taking life and imposing "hurt", it is to be pitied because of the inevitability of its defeat at the hands of a righteous pueblo. Even in her account of physical, subjective violence, Ana Maria asserts that no state is a benevolent protector to be appealed to, it is not invincible, and the pueblo needs no outside help. At the same time, Atenco is not special or isolated in its struggle, but is only one example of an eternal and universal human struggle against all exploitation.

Drawing attention to the disjunctures in the forms of representation of the horrific violence of 2006 may seem to pit hard and fast details of crimes that can be litigated (this woman was raped, this child was murdered) against subtle, perhaps esoteric, distinctions in artistic representation. One may argue that such small compromises in representation are 'worth it' if they help punish perpetrators and prevent further violence. Unfortunately, the history of the Atenco human rights cases have not proven this to be true.

In February 2009, the National Supreme Court of Justice of Mexico began to decide on a human rights case about May 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>. This ruling was important to the Frente and they erected a plantón outside of the Supreme Court building to draw attention to the proceedings. The court ruled that there had been human rights violations on May 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> in Atenco.

However, they also ruled that there was not evidence to prove that officials had ordered the police to use an excess of force and that the individual officers should be held accountable for their individual acts (Aranda 2009a, 2009b). This ruling was disappointing to the Frente (the representatives of the Frente yelled “Corrupt ministers assassinate justice!” when the ruling was read) (Aranda 2009b) and was widely seen within the movement to constitute impunity<sup>18</sup> for the officials who were exonerated, as well as the individual police who (in their view) would never be prosecuted because no one would be able to identify them individually.

This result is also reflected in a political cartoon published in *La Jornada* soon after the ruling (Rocha 2009). The drawing depicts the classical figure of Justice, blindfolded and holding a set of scales. On the scales is a piece of paper with the word “Atenco” inscribed on it. In her other hand is a wooden sword that has been cut off. A small figure with a large mustache, sombrero, and wearing *guaraches* (sandals usually associated with campesinos) stands at her feet carrying a machete. He points to the machete and asks Justice, “Wouldn’t you prefer that I loaned you my machete?” The cartoon implies that the machete is a more effective guarantee of justice than the Supreme Court. The official ruling was ultimately superficial and unsatisfying. This does not mean that laws, policies, legal proceedings, human rights, and citizenship rights are not valid or desirable. It does mean that these formal legal channels are not everything, and can often be more superficial than other means. No one in the plantón outside the courthouse felt that justice had been served by the decision. In the case of Atenco, portrayals of victimization did not result in punishing perpetrators of human rights abuses, but these are the images and stories that live on in the documentaries about Atenco. In this case, it is ultimately the documentaries and the subtleties of representation in them that have proven themselves to be more durable than the formal human rights cases. It is because the formal, legal pathways of

social action have been so unsatisfactory to the Frente that the realm of cultural production in general, and documentary film in particular, have been so important.

I have argued in this chapter that the struggles of Atenco since 2001 have been about making structural and symbolic violence visible. The Frente often did this through staging dramatic confrontations in which the machete became an important tool for casting themselves as a strong and capable adversary imbued with moral authority. I argue that the Frente's use of dramatic confrontation was successful in four overlapping ways: it disrupted dominant narratives about an invincible state and the inevitability of neoliberal 'development'; it made the perpetrators of structural violence clearly visible; it gave agency to 'victims' of structural violence; and it left room for productive solutions. However, the strategy also had several disadvantages. By utilizing dramatic confrontation and representing themselves as strong adversaries, the Frente also made itself vulnerable to accusations that they created the conflict (rather than merely making an already existing violence visible). They also risked an escalation of physical state violence. This representational strategy of the Frente deeply challenged ideas of nonviolence and human rights even as they invoked these conceptions. Because the struggles of the Frente as well as the state's response were beyond the scope of 'rights' and legality, filmmaking and dramatic confrontations that make structural violence visible became a more significant battleground in the Mexican context than policy and laws.

I argue in the next chapter that documentary films provide a de facto court of justice in which perpetrators of abuses are prosecuted and political prisoners exonerated. The documentaries produced after 2006 helped to try Enrique Peña Nieto (then governor of Mexico State) and Eduardo Medina Mora (then federal director of public safety) in the 'court' of public opinion even though the legal courts exonerated them. The Frente used these films as an

organizing tool intensively in the years 2006-2009 (and beyond). However, as I will argue in the next chapter, there was a disjuncture between how the films were used as part of a strategy of politically organizing (to release political prisoners still in prison three years after the attack), and the messages of the films that depicted this attack.

## CHAPTER 5: DISTRIBUTION AND ORGANIZATION

The medium is the messages. This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium ... result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology...What we are considering...are the psychic and social consequences of the designs or patterns as they amplify or accelerate existing processes. For the “message” of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs.

– Marshall McLuhan (2005 [1964]: 18))

In this chapter, I examine how the Frente utilized films as a tool for social organizing. I argue that three key ways that the Frente used films—gifting, screening, and selling—facilitated, or mediated (Ginsburg 2002, Turner 2002) the cultivation of an ethical disposition of *compañerismo* discussed in Chapter 3. For more than a decade, the Frente has been fighting against neoliberal corporate capitalism (Juris 2008) and part of their efforts have been to create alternative, non-corporate capitalist economies. Gifting, screening, and selling social documentaries are all non-capitalist economic practices that have helped create these economies on a face-to-face interpersonal level. Gifting films on DVD helps strengthen relationships and solidarities in a very Maussian anthropological sense. Digital films are a physical ‘home-made’ product of social movements; are produced without regard to private property, exploitative labor, or profit-motives; and are infinitely reproducible for virtually no cost. Because of these attributes, gifting them and passing them on is an important practice in cultivating a non-capitalist material economy (Escobar 2009). Screening films brings people together in one place to interact face-to-face with social movement representatives in a low-barrier organizational capacity that builds solidarity with the Frente. Watching the film in this kind of a setting is also a practice of non-capitalist consumption. Selling films helps widen social movement networks and raises money in an ethical, non-capitalist way to support travelling caravans. Through these

activities, the Atenco films (regardless of their content) helped mediate social organizing based on face-to-face human interactions and non-capitalist economic practices.

I begin this chapter with a discussion of media theory that draws connections between media practices and social organization. I then present three ethnographic vignettes that illustrate the non-capitalist practices of gifting, screening, and selling documentary films. All of these vignettes took place during a solidarity trip that I took with a commission of the Frente to the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca in April 2009. However, all of these activities are consistent with oral histories of the Frente's media usage since its inception in 2001. I conclude the chapter by arguing that the Frente used films to cultivate face-to-face relationships with people regardless of the specific goals of the movement at the time, and the specific content of the films. I argue that the content of the human rights documentaries being distributed in 2008-2010 was in tension with how they were being used as a tool for political organizing.

Throughout the chapter, I will refer to *non-capitalist* economic activities that work as a part of *anti-capitalist* social movements. The movements are *anti-capitalist* because they seek to work against and resist corporate capitalism. The practices are *non-capitalist* because they seek to work outside of corporate capitalism. This distinction will become important in the next chapter as I discuss the differences between resistance-based strategies and autonomy-based strategies.

## **5.1 MEDIA AND SOCIAL ORGANIZATION**

Today, Marshall McLuhan's argument, "the medium is the message" is a cliché that signifies how the ever-increasing speed and scale of digital technology is making the world smaller and more connected. McLuhan's argument is that there is a social aspect to media



production and distribution that tends to organize people in certain ways. He conceptualizes media production in the same light as other general modes of production such as agriculture or industrialization. All are large-scale economic and social activities that “have some obvious social patterns of organization as a result” (McLuhan 2002: 26). In this conceptualization, agriculture produces food, but it also produces a certain kind of social organization that tends toward permanent settlements, higher population densities, and job specialization (Diamond 1987). Although these modes of production are certainly not deterministic, any large-scale economic activity will have social consequences. McLuhan argues that the production and distribution of media, just like the production and distribution of food, has social consequences. While McLuhan was generally concerned with scale however, I wish to highlight shifts in how people can use media to arrange social organization in substantive, qualitative ways.

One example of how media can arrange people in certain ways is the political geography of media distribution. Jeff Himpele (1996) has argued that commercial film distribution in Bolivia reproduced urban class geographies according to how film distributors imagined which populations would pay a certain price to see certain films in certain neighborhoods. The content and messages of the films was not as important in his conceptualization as the film’s status. In other words, desirable films were shown in upper-class neighborhoods for a higher price and then slowly moved toward lower-class neighborhoods as ticket prices went down. Himpele argues that rather than simply reflecting urban class and racial geographies, film distribution helped produce these geographies.

Taking up the idea of media as a social force, Faye Ginsburg (2002) argues that for an anthropology of media, “analysis needs to focus less on the formal qualities of film and video as text and more on the cultural *mediations* that occur through film and video works” (Ginsburg

2002: 212). In her work with aboriginal Australian television networks in the 1990s, she found that media production mediated (facilitated, or provided an arena for) the production of indigenous identities as well as indigenous content. In contrast to Himpele's film distributors, Ginsberg's television producers purposefully used their television station to cultivate indigenous identities, both amongst themselves and for a larger, national, largely white Australian audience. She argues:

when other forms are no longer effective, indigenous media offers a possible means – social, cultural, and political – for reproducing and transforming cultural identity among people who have experienced massive political, geographic, and economic disruption (Ginsburg 2002: 217)

This reproduction and transformation of identity did happen through the development of content for the television station about aboriginal people, but it also happened through the economic and political structures that came about as a result of the television station. The station mediated professional training programs, interpersonal connections between aboriginal artists, and connections between videographers and performers. The station also mediated recognition and legitimation of aboriginal identities in a national, mainstream arena. According to her conceptualization, aboriginal Australians had used in the past, and continued to use, other forms of mediation (oral histories, traditional dances and ceremonies, even legal pathways) to help mediate identity, but television production became one means of working toward collective social, cultural, and political goals.

Ginsburg's unproblematic conception of 'identity' may obscure some of the subtleties of how aboriginal television has transformed aboriginal activism, social structures, or discrimination of aboriginal people on a national level. However, in highlighting how important the practices and structures of cultural production can be, she also brings processes of social,

economic, and political transformation out of the realm of rational dialogue (Habermas 1989) in which things happen because we talk about them, and into a realm of human interaction in which things happen because we create new social, economic, and political structures that impact culture. Furthermore, these structures do not have to be legal structures, but can also take the form of something like a television station.

Advancing the idea that filmmaking can mediate social and economic transformations, Terence Turner (2002) presents a case in Brazil in which indigenous filmmaking had dramatic and almost immediate social, cultural, economic, and political consequences. He argues that “the act of video-making itself...begins to ‘mediate’ a variety of social and political relationships within the indigenous community” (Turner 2002: 78-79). Making and editing Kayapo video served as the basis for individuals to become important political leaders and to establish and legitimize the establishment of entire villages because it immediately became a very prestigious activity. In these cases, it was not the specific discursive or representational content of videos that had socially transformative consequences. It was the practice of film production and distribution, coupled with the social, political, and cultural meanings and structures that arose around these practices. As in Ginsburg’s work, Kayapo filmmakers consciously and purposefully used filmmaking as a transformative political practice.

Turner and Ginsburg are representative of a large body of literature in anthropology concerned with indigenous media (see Turner Wilson & Stewart 2008 for example). This literature is deeply committed to advocating for and supporting indigenous populations throughout the world, and so its research often misses how indigenous media have impacted non-indigenous communities. In other words, indigenous video has played a role in redefining the uses to which media are put as social and political practice, what Buddle calls an “alternate

economy of practice” (2008:141), not just for indigenous communities, but in non-indigenous contexts as well.

These broader impacts can be seen most clearly in the context of social movements that have had some contact with the ways that indigenous social movements and cultural producers have used filmmaking as a social and political tool. Juff Juris (2008), for example, describes the multiple roles that electronic communications play in transnational anti-corporate capitalist movements. He argues that activist networks of communication online are also constitutive of their political practices and organizations. In other words, activists use the social practices of communications technology to form the basis of their organizational structures (what Juris calls “form”) and as a cultural and political ideal of what they believe larger (non-electronically mediated) social structures *should* be like (what Juris calls “norm”) (Juris 2008: 11). In this way, the circulation of discourse through electronic networks becomes not just how activists talk, but what they *do* to create a social, political, and cultural world in which they want to live. Kathleen Buddle makes an almost identical argument in the context of native women’s radio in Canada. She argues that, “the networks established [through the radio station] become not merely a means of exchanging ideas but themselves the *ends* of social action” (Buddle 2008:135, emphasis in original).

I argued in Chapter 3 that an examination of the transformation/production of self and ethical disposition in social movements is important because it lies at an important intersection between processes of social and cultural transformation (in terms of human relationships and conceptions of self), and processes of cultural production (in terms of media production and the creative arts). I argued that this intersection is important for three reasons: 1) It helps us understand broad processes of cultural transformation in terms of how subjects help to produce

themselves. 2) An emphasis on the constitution of self allows us to make connections between theories of how media work and theories of how social movements work by placing cultural transformation in the context of human relationships. 3) It reveals how people can creatively use the tools available to them (even provided to them by neoliberal economic and political forces) to cultivate a commitment to selflessness and collectivity rather than self-interested, profit-seeking individuality.

In this chapter, I show how practices in cultivating this ethical disposition, specifically the distribution of social documentary films, help construct non-capitalist economies. These economies bring the self-making processes discussed in Chapter 3 to a level of practice that is creative (in contrast to negatively disciplining and policing) and social (in contrast to individual internal processes). The construction of these ‘alternate economies of practice’ is where social organizing comes together with cultural production. Just as the scholars mentioned above have noted that media production can have profound social, political, and cultural consequences, films (as a kind of commodity) mediate human interactions that expand the Frente’s solidarity network at the same time that they help to cultivate a culture of ethical, non-capitalist economic activity.

Films are a productive point of reference to examine in this context because they are deeply contradictory as economic objects. The Atenco documentaries are meant to be consumed, even as they critique consumerism. Films are commodities that are bought and sold, even as they are vehemently anti-capitalist. They are used as a tool against global corporate capitalism, even as the materials that make them (cameras, mini DV tapes, editing software, computers), the materials that they are made of (plastic DVDs, photocopied booklets), and the economic relations that brought these materials to Mexico (neoliberal free trade agreements) are all firmly rooted and made possible because of global corporate capitalism. Because of these

contradictory properties, films (as experiences and as objects) mediate human interactions quite differently than activities that surround more capitalist, profit-driven commodities. They take advantage of economic activities everyone desires in the contemporary age (giving valuable gifts, consuming media, buying products) and transforms these activities into a means of cultivating non-capitalist economic practices that are part of being a good compa. Because of the unique characteristics of social documentary, through gifting, screening, and selling them, films can mediate and innovate non-capitalist economic practices.

## 5.2 GIFTING FILMS

In April 2009, I accompanied a small commission of the Frente on an overnight bus trip



to the southern state of Oaxaca. The weekend trip was meant to build solidarities between the Frente and Oaxacan social movements. The commission consisted of Virgilio, a grandmotherly woman named Rosa in her 70's or 80's, her young twenty-something granddaughter named Laura, and a middle-aged man named Carlos who had just emerged after three years in hiding<sup>19</sup>. Although Carlos was charged under the same series of arrest warrants as Ignacio del Valle, he was never arrested in 2006 and the charges on his warrants were recently dropped at the time of the visit, allowing him to come out of hiding and travel with us. I

was invited in part because Virgilio knew that I would be moving to Oaxaca soon and would appreciate contacts there, and in part because of a popular perception that foreign presences

might provide some protection against police harassment or violence. The weekend visit to Oaxaca was very busy and included an appearance at the annual teachers' union meeting, interviews on various pirate radio stations, a supportive visit to the worker barricade of a mine, several film screenings, and a day-long occupation of the central plaza complete with alternative vendors, speeches, music, and performances.

When we arrived in Oaxaca city in the early morning, our hosts picked us up at the bus station and drove us to the anarchist collective house where we would be staying for the weekend. This space (that I will refer to as the House) was an attempt to bring together a dozen or more young people who had been involved in social movements (some of whom had been political prisoners in the past) in a communal living and working situation. Our hosts explained that the House was under constant police surveillance and that police had attempted to break in twice under the pretext that they were trafficking in drugs. Both times, residents and neighbors were able to drive the police off, but as a result they were trying to open up the House as much as possible through activities open to the public. These activities (including film screenings, performances, and a small shop that sold the arts and crafts of political prisoners) brought more and varied people into the house, providing protection for those who lived there and legitimating the space as a center for cultural and social activities.

Although our hosts did not explicitly state this, based on the deeply respectful and laudatory reception that the Frente commission received wherever we went, it is also likely that the Frente's presence at the House helped to legitimize them as a powerful political organization that has access to national and international exposure, as well as quite powerful friends who are able to mobilize large numbers of people. The visit was advantageous to the Frente to raise awareness of the political prisoners campaign, and it was also advantageous to the House

because of the increased exposure and association with such a well-recognized and powerful social movement.

Upon arriving, Virgilio immediately produced a packet of three DVDs (documentaries about the Frente) from his luggage that he presented to our young, thirty-something host as a gift. The gift was not personal, but rather from the Frente to this collective in exchange for organizing the events around the Frente, giving them a place to stay, feeding them, and for their general support and hospitality. It was a small gesture that would not be unusual for anyone travelling a long distance for a visit to friends or family members. The Frente has a long history of giving films as gifts in similar circumstances, to the extent that Salvador Díaz proudly claims that his first Atenco film was used as their “calling card” during the struggle against the airport.

I first became interested in giving films as gifts because it is a primary way through which social documentaries are distributed. These films can only occasionally be found in bookstores, rarely come out in theaters, and cannot be found in video rental stores. They are much more likely to be bought at a political march from a pirate video vendor and then copied for friends who might be interested.

Judging from the photocopied paper inserts and the plastic sleeves of two of the three films that Virgilio pulled from his bag, it was clear that this is how Virgilio had also come by these films, even though he knows personally all of the people that made them. The third film was one that had just been produced by the association of NGOs, human rights organizations, and social movements that were organizing together to release political prisoners from the May 2006 attack. In 2009 in Mexico, the personal, face-to-face transaction of one person handing another a film on a physical DVD remained a primary way that films gained new audiences and were distributed to new physical areas. The new film was not in distribution in Oaxaca before



we arrived. Through physically bringing it to Oaxaca and gifting it to an ally, it was assured that the film would be copied and distributed in the area. At first, it might be found only in the small store in the collective house. Then it would appear in the collection of pirate street vendors, and soon would find its way into the inventories of the personal libraries of dozens of people who burn copies for their friends, who then burn copies for their friends.

In 2009, films were sometimes distributed online through streaming sites such as YouTube and Vimeo, and for download on some independent media sites like Indymedia, Salon Chingón, and Archive.org. However, most people still accessed the internet in busy internet cafés and college computer labs. These spaces are not very conducive to immersing oneself in streaming a movie, and while downloads are possible, the large file sizes can mean long periods of time waiting, each minute of which might be counted and charged. Using computer power offline to copy DVDs was a much more reasonable option in 2009.

Gifting films is good for the films and independent media, but why are films a ubiquitous gift of the Frente? Giving a machete would be the most obvious gift of solidarity, and these are frequently given (as I showed in the last chapter). However on this occasion, we arrived to Oaxaca by commercial bus, and a machete (while not illegal) would have drawn undesirable attention while traveling across state lines<sup>20</sup>. The red bandana that the Frente is known for is also a common gift (sometimes placed around someone's neck as they are presented with a machete) but only one person can wear a bandana. It is a personal, rather than a communal gift. Furthermore, giving anything not immediately associated with the Frente that is a product of corporate capitalism or transnational corporations would not be appropriate because it would indicate support of capitalism. It is a significant mark of our age, and the enormity of what the Frente and other anti-capitalist social movements are attempting, that even this most basic non-

capitalist economic activity – giving a gift as a demonstration of friendship – is difficult to accomplish without utilizing commodities produced by transnational corporations.

The media of the movement make an appropriate gift in this case because it was not produced for profit, it has an explicit political message, it can be consumed collectively, and it supports the producers and networks of cultural production of the social movements. In addition, a gift of media helps both movements. The Frente gets wider exposure whenever the films are screened, and the House gets some content, both for film series, and possibly to copy and sell in their small store as a means of support. In the case of Atenco (which has considerable social capital), this small Oaxacan collective also has the privilege of associating themselves with a nationally famous successful social movement

The ability to gift DVDs is a primary way that the films are helpful to the Frente. They help build relationships and solidarities in a very classic anthropological Maussian sense of using a gift to build and maintain human relationships. Throughout our time in Oaxaca, lots of media changed hands (in the form of music, books, DVDs, web addresses, chain e-mails) simply as a result of sharing interesting or cool information with new friends. DVDs are desirable as objects and they meaningful because they are one of the few products that a social movement produces. DVDs help mediate face-to-face relationships based on sharing resources and knowledge. It is an added advantage that the films can be reproduced infinitely and very cheaply, both by the Frente and recipients of the gift.

Virgilio's gift was also a personal and political practice tied to his cultivation of *compañerismo*. I argued in Chapter 3 that filmmakers are able to use making films as a creative practice of cultivating a particular ethical disposition oriented toward collectivism rather than self-interest, profit, and individualism. Distributing films, although not as creative, also mediates

the cultivation of these same qualities. Gifting or sharing documentaries is an act that defies a neoliberal sense of economic activity and for this reason, is generally illegal on the grounds that it is copyright infringement. In the case of social documentaries, it is not illegal because there are no rights reserved on the films. (This, in itself was a practice of cultivating *compañerismo* on the part of the filmmakers.) Gifting a film is one of the few economic activities that is not self-interested, profit-driven, individualistic, and it does not recognize the conception of private property or utilize exploitative labor. Operating outside of these damaging economic practices is a politically motivated choice, and as such is a political, as well as economic, practice. In other words, it is the kind of thing that a good *compa* would do, and the kind of thing that helps one cultivate *compañerismo*

Lastly, because the film and the act of giving the film has all of these ethical non-capitalist qualities of *compañerismo*, this practice has also mediated a human relationship based on non-capitalist ways of relating to one another. It has supported a material and moral economy that in many ways operates outside conduits of global corporate capitalism. It is a partial practice certainly, because all of the technology that went into making the film and the DVD are products of corporate capitalism, and even neoliberal economic policy. Nevertheless, gifting films helps strengthen a culture of operating outside of corporate capitalism, and is transgressive precisely because it transforms commodities of corporate capitalism into non-capitalist ‘commodities’.

The terms ‘cultural production’ and ‘media’ take on new and deeper meanings in this context. Filmmakers are very literally producing a *medium* of human interactions—a substrate or a context—that helps *produce a culture* of non-capitalism. In addition to producing discourse

and mediating messages, films also operate on a social level of human interaction, creating social, economic, and political structures that are culturally transformative.

### 5.3 SCREENING FILMS

Later in the evening of our first day in Oaxaca, after several public appearances of the commission, we returned to the collective's house for a film screening. A projector and screen were set up in one long room and enough folding chairs for forty people to attend. People of all descriptions and ages came to watch the film, including a small French film crew (who recorded the speeches made afterward), and a young indigenous man who had travelled all day from a



teachers' college in a rural area. The film they had planned to screen was *Atenco, un crimen de estado* (Kolectivo Klamvé 2006), which was introduced simply as "a film about Atenco". A few minutes into the film however, the image froze and would not recover. After several minutes of playing with the DVD player and projector, Virgilio put in a recompiled film called *Atenco Recargado*<sup>21</sup> that didn't have any difficulties.

After the film, Virgilio, Rosa, Laura, and Carlos said a few words to the small crowd and invited the audience's participation. The French film crew recorded. Several people stood to express their support and solidarity with the Frente and offer their assistance. The speeches and conversation went on for at least an hour after the film had ended, meaning that the crowd had been sitting in their metal folding chairs for almost four hours. Afterward, people did not leave, but stayed

around drinking the refreshments provided by the House and exchanging e-mails, phone numbers, and stories.

This event was very much like hundreds of social documentary screenings that I attended in 2008 and 2009 in venues throughout Mexico City, Atenco, and Oaxaca. Sometimes these screenings were in cultural centers (like the Casa de Cultura in Coyoacán), free public centers (like the José Martí theater in a downtown Metro station), ‘autonomous’ spaces (like the Café Ramona, a Zapatista space), university classrooms, independent bookstores, and even bars. The films were always free, and nearly always were introduced by a member of the movement represented in the film (or someone quite familiar with the movement) followed by a question and answer period.

Much like the gift of DVDs, these film screenings mediated a certain kind of human interaction. First, in the case of the screening in Oaxaca, it provided a forum through which local people could meet members of the Frente, ask them questions, and build relationships with them. This could have happened without a film, of course, but the film was preferable to the commission for a variety of personal reasons. When I asked Virgilio why they screened a film instead of just talking about the Frente, he replied that it gets very repetitive to tell the same stories over and over, and it is traumatic to relive political violence again and again in speeches. I also suspect, from hearing Virgilio talk about his own experience with violence, that there is also a fear of crying or showing emotion while telling these stories, especially for men. Conversely, if it is not traumatic and they do not show emotion, it may not convey the intensity of their experience and the urgency of the issues that they are talking about. A film has the benefit of never losing its emotional intensity, and sparing members of the Frente from having to repeat (and relive) many of their experiences for an audience<sup>22</sup>.

Addressing a question about why he prefers to present a film rather than a speech, Carlos told me that after being in hiding for three years, speaking publically about the Frente and his role in the Frente was a little uncomfortable. He also said that public speaking was not easy for him. Rosa and Laura were also quiet and preferred not to say very much. They responded to questions eloquently and capably, but were very reticent to make speeches and only spoke when Virgilio, Carlos, or an audience member urged them to speak. In short, the film mediated an encounter with members of the Frente that was informative and impactful for the audience, and easier on the presenters.

Second, the screening mediated a political event much like a plantón or an occupation, but with an extremely low barrier for entry and risk. The people who came to the collective house were showing support for the Frente and the local collective through their presence at the screening, much like one might show support by coming to a political march. As I mentioned above, the house was under constant police surveillance and the presence of more than forty people, including foreigners and a film crew, was a display of strength and legitimacy for the House. Unlike a political demonstration or occupation however, the film screening provided an innocuous activity for such a display of solidarity and strength. It would be very difficult for the police to claim that a film screening was dangerous or illegal, even though organizing and attending such an event is a political act. In other words, the film mediated a very low intensity, low commitment political event that was open to a wide range of people and that made connections among a wide variety of people and organizations.

Third, the film enabled all of the audience members to engage in an ethical practice of non-capitalist consumption. Much like gifting DVDs helps create a non-capitalist economy, watching social documentaries (for free in an anarchist collective) helps support non-capitalist

cultural production and helps create a culture of non-capitalist consumption. Not unlike buying organic, locally grown food, attending a social documentary is an ethical practice of supporting an alternative economy through consumption. The alternative economy of locally grown organic food largely operates under a logic of consumer demand and profit-margins however (Pollan 2006), while an alternative economy of social documentary films operates under a non-capitalist logic.

Much like gifting films, screening them is a small transformative practice in cultural production. It mediates human interactions according to an alternate, non-capitalist economy of consumption and reciprocity. The screening provides a forum for the Frente to broaden their network of friends and allies through face-to-face human interactions. The film also allows the host collective to build legitimacy through having so many people in their space and allying themselves with a famous social movement. All attendees can use the occasion to cultivate an ethical disposition of *compañerismo* through participating in non-capitalist economic and political practices.

#### **5.4 SELLING FILMS**

The next day, Sunday, the House and allies had planned a daylong occupation of the central plaza (the *zócalo*) of Oaxaca City. On Sundays during this time in 2009, the main event in the *zócalo* was a classical music concert organized by the city government. From the perspective of our Oaxacan hosts, this classical music concert was an excuse to make illegal any political demonstration in the central plaza on its most busy day. The concert prevented any large party from gathering in the largest open area of the square because this is where the musicians sat, and anyone making noise or speaking over a loudspeaker could be removed under

the premise that they were interrupting the concert. In effect, our hosts felt that the classical music concert was a physical and auditory government occupation of the (ostensibly public) central square. This occupation was made all the more significant because the concert was a display of European (colonial) music and a reminder of the deep class and ethnic hierarchies in Oaxaca that enabled only a small percentage of the population to be familiar with European classical music. In short, while for the many tourists and wealthy Oaxacans in the square on a Sunday, the concert was an innocuously enjoyable treat; for others the concert was a dramatic performance of structural violence not unlike a police barricade. It provided an excellent opportunity to create a dramatic confrontation and replace the colonialist music with more accessible and less hierarchical performances.

The plan was to mobilize a large number of people very early in the morning in the *zócalo* to erect a tent to prevent the concert from setting up. Throughout the day, musicians and artists allied with the movements would perform in the tent, and there would be panel discussions about the concerns of the Frente and other social movements throughout Mexico. In the evening, after the sun went down, the new film that Virgilio brought would be shown on a large outdoor screen. In this way, a film screening would become part of the plaza occupation, part of a series of performances replacing the classical music.

Aiding in the occupation was a large association of independent vendors who normally were not allowed to sell their goods in the *zócalo*. Oaxaca is a popular tourist destination in Mexico (for national and international tourists) and for many years vendors came to sell things to tourists in the public space of the central square. In recent years, police have forced most of these vendors away. According to one independent vendor, only a very few vendors remained in 2009, those who sold particular goods and who paid large fees to the government<sup>23</sup>. For many



local people, pushing the vendors out of the central public square represented a political statement that the square belonged only to local elites (with the money and resources to open restaurants and stores in the commercial buildings lining the zócalo) and tourists (who could afford to shop and eat in these expensive locations). During the daylong occupation of the square, the vendors could take advantage of the new temporary regime to make some money, the movement would have more bodies and physical things preventing anyone from removing them, and the commercial activity would draw passersby (including tourists) into the political event. More tourists not only meant more people and more customers for the vendors, it also meant that the police were less likely to forcibly remove the occupation for fear of scaring away future tourism. The tourists, on their part, were unlikely to even know that they had unwittingly become part of a political demonstration as they listened to the performances and perused goods laid out on blankets on the stone surface of the square.

The products of these independent vendors were not unlike the products of other outdoor markets throughout the city. Their goods included indigenous textiles, handmade indigenous-style clothing and bags, homemade toys and sculptures made out of potato chip bags and soda cans, wood and stone carvings, and handmade jewelry made out of stones, wire, and hemp fiber. There were also vendors selling Che posters, used books of political philosophy, handmade photocopied booklets of Noam Chomsky speeches and the writings of Ricardo Flores Magón<sup>24</sup>.

There were also several vendors of social documentary films. The largest of these vendors wore a t-shirt with a large canalseisdejulio logo across the front and had set up a table (most vendors sold off of tarps on the ground) stacked high with dozens of copies of fifty or more distinct films. A small television and DVD player screened the films behind the vendor and demonstrated the quality of the images. Other vendors sold a few documentaries alongside

books and posters, or alongside mantels with Zapatista images and slogans embroidered on them. Although on this particular occasion no one from the Frente's commission sold videos, on a very similar occasion several months later in which the Frente sent a commission to the Oaxacan zócalo, a member of the Frente brought out and sold (very quickly) a dozen or more copies of a DVD out of his hands. The vendor told me that these sales would help pay for bus tickets back to Atenco after the event.

Selling DVDs of social documentaries is a ubiquitous part of political demonstrations in Mexico. However, it is a problematic practice in terms of cultivating *compañerismo*. The DVDs being sold may not take part in exploitative labor or corporate capitalist modes of production.



However, neither are they a good example of selfless, profitless, communitarian *compañerismo*. This is why the member of the Frente who sold some films in the zócalo did so very quickly and surreptitiously. In a very pragmatic, concrete sense, they needed some cash for bus tickets back to Atenco, but it would

have looked very bad if the Frente appeared to be selling things in order to make a profit. In distributing films, as well as making them, making a profit is an indication of self-interested protagonismo likely to incur a great deal of caustic gossip, both within the movement and for critics of the movement. When talking with people in Atenco who were critical of the Frente, for example, I often heard reference to how much money Ignacio del Valle's wife took in from international allies. One woman told me in no uncertain terms, "The social movement is a

profitable enterprise for her.” In the context of an activity that the Frente might participate in as an entity, making a profit discounts their assertions that they are selflessly working toward the betterment of all people. For this reason, although selling home made DVDs in the street is an integral part of the way that social documentaries are distributed, and the distribution of social documentaries is very good for the movement, they are almost never sold by the movement directly. I never saw Beto, for instance, selling his documentaries of the Frente. He only sold his documentaries of community festivals. Otherwise, he might be seen to be making a profit off of the movement.

When taken from the perspective of an individual having to find a way to make a living however, and wanting to do so in an ethical way, selling social documentaries (and/or handmade crafts, photocopied pamphlets and books, etc.) is a way to make a living without relying on exploitative labor, supporting large corporations, or encouraging a vapid consumer culture. In other words, it is a way to make some money partially outside of the sphere of corporate capitalism. In Chapter 1, I introduced Manuel, a young man who identified as part of La Otra Campaña who made his living selling used LPs and cassette tapes on the street in Mexico City. For him, selling media was part of an effort to cultivate an ethical, non-capitalist means of making a living that did not support or rely on corporate capitalism and exploitative labor (exploiting his own labor or others’).

There are several unique characteristics of social documentaries that mitigate the capitalist, profit-seeking, private-property characteristics of selling something. First, none of the Atenco films have copyright restrictions or barriers placed on their content. (This is also true of the vast majority of social documentary film in Mexico.) Most of the films carry either a CopyLeft or a Creative Commons designation, both of which encourage free copying and

distributing as long as the work remains intact and is attributed to its original creator. This enables them to be screened for free, and also means that they are infinitely reproducible (with no loss of image or sound quality) by anyone with a DVD burner. The lack of copyright restrictions encourages and helps to build a culture of creating media without regard to notions of private property.

Second, having been produced without copyright restrictions and a concern toward profit, the value of a burned DVD is close to zero. On the street in 2009, they were generally sold for 20 pesos (about \$1.70 USD at the time). In 2012 the going rate at #YoSoy132 demonstrations seemed to be ten pesos, or about 77 cents<sup>25</sup>. However, most of these films can be obtained for free by anyone with relationships (even somewhat marginal ones) with people in the movement because of gifting and sharing networks. The fact that they can quite easily be obtained for free means that the price of the DVDs more closely resembles a convenience fee for providing the film at the right time in the right place, or simply an excuse to give a donation to a member of a worthy cause. In other words, even when the films are sold, the relationship between the films and their market price has only a distant relationship with their value. Although the blank DVD on which they are burned was a commodity with a set market price based on quality, demand, etc., once that DVD has a social documentary burned onto it, the DVD becomes part of a different sort of economy.

Third, distributing the political content of the DVDs (even though these messages aren't consistent) is seen as helping a network of social movements. Manuel also saw selling Atenco DVDs as a way to create relationships and expand the network of allies of La Otra Campaña and the Frente. This is also consistent with the motivations of a self-made union of vendors that sold films during political demonstrations in 2008-2009 called UPCI (Unión de Promotores de la

Cultura de la Izquierda). This 'union' was made up of a group of vendors who began selling DVDs, books, posters, and other media at the massive plantón in Mexico City set up in support of the center-left presidential candidate Andrés Manuel Lopez Obrador, after he narrowly lost the presidential election in 2006. Although my short interviews with members of this group revealed that they had wildly different political beliefs and practices, they all believed they were helping to create and strengthen a network of social movements through selling media. One slogan written on a sticker advertising the union was "For the right to work and freedom for the people!" [*¡Por el derecho al trabajo y la libertad del pueblo!*].

Selling documentaries, much like gifting or screening them, also creates face-to-face human interactions that build relationships and strengthen networks. My first step in making contact with La Otra Campaña and the Frente, for example, occurred through a vendor selling DVDs and Zapatista handicrafts in 2006. The same man who I bought my first documentaries from told me how to get to the offices of *canalseisdejulio*, and several years later still gives me (for free) copies of obscure social-movement related films from all over the world. Manuel made contact with a major figure in anarchist networks in Mexico City (a man that he fondly thinks of as a teacher) at the punk market El Chopo where this man was selling records and DVDs. Throughout my research, I frequently utilized a sales transaction to find out about film screenings, marches, political events, organizing meetings, or even simply the current political fears and desires circulating amongst members and allies of various social movements. By spreading a blanket on the ground with an array of political paraphernalia, vendors identify themselves with social movements and open themselves up to discussions about politics and the efforts of social movements. By showing interest in what they have for sale and asking questions, customers and vendors identify one another as friends and allies and share

information, literally over (standing above and on either side of) social documentaries. The documentaries have mediated a human connection, and non-capitalist political, economic, and social networks by doing nothing more than lying on the street.

## **5.5 THREE STAGES OF THE FRENTE**

The Frente and allies gifted, screened, and sold films as part of their political strategy throughout the entire period from 2001 until 2010. During this time however, the Frente went through three very different eras of political goals. From 2001-2002, they were attempting to abrogate the airport expropriation decree. From 2002-2006, they were attempting to help other social movements organize and build social movement networks throughout Mexico and the world. From 2006-2010, they were attempting to liberate political prisoners and litigate human rights cases.

The films of each of these eras reflect the political goals of the moment. The two films from early 2002 (before the abrogation) argue for the importance of the Frente and the virtues of their movement. The four films produced after the abrogation celebrate the victory of the movement and encourage others to follow their example. The nine full-length documentaries produced between 2006 and 2010 denounced human rights abuses and described the plights of political prisoners. During each of these eras, the Frente made use of the films through gifting, screening, and selling. This means that the specific content of the films and the political goals that they were being mobilized around are independent from the actual practices utilized when organizing through films. In other words, gifting, screening, and selling films work as a way to use films regardless of the goals of the movement or the specific content of the films. The Frente largely used films as part of a strategy of political organizing that relied on face-to-face human

relationships and solidarities cultivated among people who came together in a space because of a film, whether that relationship was mediated by gifting, screening, or selling.

The content of the documentaries in the first two stages described above fit very well with the organizational goals of the movement and the confrontational street theater that the Frente had become known for. However, the human rights documentaries being distributed in 2008-2010 were in tension with how they were being used as tools for political organizing. Part of this inconsistency was because the filmmakers producing most of these films did not have very close relationships with the Frente and had difficulty replicating—or simply had no desire to replicate—their sense of dramatic confrontation.

Part of the inconsistency was due to the simultaneous existence of distinct organizational efforts of the Frente. The attack of 2006 forced the Frente to converse with the state on its own terms, resulting in two legal battles: one for the release of political prisoners, and the other to try human rights cases. This forced them to spend a lot more time and effort working directly through legal structures than in the previous two stages (in which they often tried to bypass these structures). The human rights language of the films reflects these legal struggles. The early films (*Atenco*, *Un Crimen de Estado*, *Romper el Cerco*, *Seis Testimonios*) are rich with documentation of politicians' lies, suspicious political alliances between police and politicians involved in the attack, and above all, exhaustive detailed descriptions of physical human rights abuses, including sexual assaults. The later ones (*Atenco a Dos Años*, *Atenco a Tres Años*, *Justicia*, *Tierra y Libertad para Atenco*) feature complex legal strategies and irregularities, and long scenes of people standing outside of courthouses listening to lawyers, as well as in-depth descriptions of bodily harm. The prevailing literature on how human rights documentaries work indicate that the Frente should have been using these documentaries to create international

political pressure to persecute these cases locally (Keck & Sikkink 1998, McLagan 2003, Gregory 2006). However, spending a weekend in Oaxaca with an anarchist collective was not going to help the Frente with its legal battles. Distributing the new documentary in Oaxaca (arguably an area with less, rather than more, political weight) was not going to create ‘outside’ political pressure according to the boomerang model.

A second organizational effort was attempting to build the Frente back to national prominence as a formidable political entity. The attack of 2006 had weakened the Frente considerably through dispersing some key members throughout prisons and in exile. They were just slowly returning to the movement with the launch of the political prisoner campaign in 2008. The attack also created a lot of animosities in the town of Atenco, and between various factions of the Frente and its allied social movements. Various political prisoners had different lawyers with many distinct legal strategies, and some of the political prisoners had never been affiliated with any social movement; they were simply residents who had been picked up in the attack. Some people from allied social movements felt that the situation in 2006 should have been handled in a different way, blamed the repression and the arrests on another allied movement, or felt that they had not been appropriately supported by another group. Movements were arguing with one another, and some previously unified movements split into arguing factions. There was a lot of internal organizing that needed to happen in order for the Frente to regain internal cohesion and repair solidarities with other movements. This work had very little to do with the language of the films, and a lot to do with the organizational activity surrounding the films.

The human rights language of most films appeared to pose some organizational and motivational challenges. The visual language of these films was very different from the visual language of the earlier films and the street theater the Frente had become known for. The



characteristics of productive confrontation that I listed in Chapter 4 were: disruption of dominant narratives about an invincible state and the inevitability of neoliberal ‘development’; making the perpetrators of structural violence clearly visible; giving agency to ‘victims’ of structural violence; and leaving room for productive solutions. The human rights films of 2006-2010 used a language of victimization and suffering bodies that accomplished only one of those characteristics: making perpetrators of structural violence clearly visible. However, making these perpetrators visible without accomplishing any of the other goals resulted in these films portraying an image of the perpetrators as evil and invincible. It seems easy to conclude that the filmmakers who made the films had in mind a political project of using human rights organizations to prosecute offenders and free prisoners, while the Frente had a different project in mind of working outside of legal frameworks to increase solidarity networks and create internal pressure. They attempted to use the documentaries for their own purposes, even though their content was in tension with the Frente’s goals.

This factor was certainly at play, and deeply impacted the films’ visual and narrative concentration on individual harm. However, even though the discrepancy between the language of the films and the Frente’s organizational goals held some tension, it would be false to conclude that they worked at cross-purposes, or that the human rights language of the films detracted in some way from the Frente’s organizational goals. Instead, I argue that the discrepancy between the language of the films and the way that they were used as an organizational tool correlate to two distinct goals of the Frente from this time period: one struggling against the state in an oppositional way, and another working to build up the movement in a positive, creative way. These two complementary, but distinct goals also correlate to a more reformist, less radical aspect of the Frente that is interested in conversing

with the state and working through official channels, and a more radical aspect of the Frente that is interested in creating autonomy from the state. The former is based on a resistance model of organizing (anti-capitalist) and the latter is based on an autonomy model of organizing (non-capitalist). The differences between these two strategies—and how these distinct, but complementary aspects played themselves out in the production and distribution of one documentary—is the topic of the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 6: AUTONOMY

In this chapter, I argue that the cultivation of *compañerismo*, the dramatic confrontations, and the alternative non-capitalist economies I have discussed in previous chapters are not simply acts of resistance to neoliberal governmentality (Lazar 2008); they are an attempt to create partial autonomies from the state and corporate capitalism. I argue that there is a productive distinction between what I will call ‘resistance practices’ (practices meant to impede and speak out against) and ‘autonomy practices’ (the daily practices that when added together make the state and large-scale corporate capitalism less relevant to one’s life). Autonomy practices are a central part of the Frente’s political strategy, as well as many of the filmmakers who made the human rights documentaries I presented in the last chapter. The prevailing literature on human rights videos theorizes the political work they do solely in terms of communication conduits that induce ‘outside’ audiences to act through legal means (Keck & Sikkink 1998, McLagan 2003, Gregory 2006). I argue that this obscures how media create and reshape fields of social and political practice through a local network of face-to-face human interactions. Within a strategy of autonomy, there is no ‘outside’ audience that needs to be convinced, mobilized, or won over; there is only an ‘inside’ collective that needs to be well-informed and organized. The emphasis on autonomy practices reflects and helps constitute the recent shift from Marxist-inspired social action and strategy to Anarchist-inspired social action and strategy seen in transnational anti-globalization movements (Juris 2008).

I begin the chapter with a discussion of prevailing scholarship on the mechanisms through which social documentary film operates as a social and political force. I argue that this communications model does not take into account the intentions and social practices of documentary filmmakers in Mexico. I then present the conceptions of ‘resistance practice’ and

‘autonomy practice’ as a way of understanding this discrepancy. I briefly present the social movement La Ota Campaña as an important genealogy for autonomy strategies and practices in Mexico. Lastly, I discuss the making of the film *Romper el Cerco* (Canalseisdejulio & Promedios 2006) as a case study in how *compañerismo*, dramatic confrontation, and non-capitalist economies operated during the making of the film. I use the conceptions of resistance and autonomy practice to help understand the multiple valences through which documentary film production and distribution is constitutive of a field of social, political, and economic action that aids in cultural production. I conclude the chapter by bringing the discussion back to the Frente. By posing challenges to the distinction between filmmakers and film audiences, I bring together *compañerismo*, making structural violence visible, and non-capitalist economies in the creative field of filmmaking to argue that social documentary films create a constitutive arena for the social production of culture.

## **6.1 FILMMAKING BEYOND THE COMMUNICATIONS MODEL**

When I began investigating the films that denounced human rights abuses in Atenco in May 2006, I expected the filmmakers I interviewed to express hope that their films would create social and political pressure to decrease the impunity of police in Mexico. However, this proposition was far from the minds of the filmmakers making videos about the abuses. Instead, they conceived of making films denouncing human rights abuses as an active political practice and means of social organization in its own right. For them, making a film was a form of direct action. The impunity of police in Mexico, I was told, will never be changed. In the words of a member of Colectivo Klamvé:

To hope that because people say [of our film], “how appalling, how could they have done this?” that Peña Nieto [then governor of the state of Mexico] and Vicente Fox [then President] learn? That would never happen! I mean the evidence is there that people were tortured! The medical reports are there and nothing happens. No, it doesn’t happen like that. There’s no way.

Literature investigating human rights videos has concentrated on their usefulness in creating political pressure through shaming perpetrators of abuses (Keck & Sikkink 1998, McLagan 2003, Gregory 2006). This model sees films as information conduits to the ‘outside’ world from communities that have experienced abuses. The unwanted attention and publicity that the films create shame perpetrators of abuses (generally governments or large corporations) into changing policies or decreasing levels of (subjective) violence. As a result of this conception, researchers have been concerned with the degree to which human rights media can incite people ‘outside’ of the conflict to act to punish abusers or prevent future abuses. This focus parallels transnational social movement literature and the “boomerang” theory (Keck & Sikkink 1998, Tarrow 2005) in which local groups seek the support of NGOs and other countries to create political pressure domestically.

I argue that this boomerang/shaming model is problematic for both practical and theoretical reasons. First, although the shaming strategy is clearly used effectively in some cases, Avni (2006) points out that this approach can actually perpetuate abuses by increasing antagonisms. Furthermore, conceiving of privileged, Global North audiences as ‘outside’ audiences does not take into account the degree to which these populations are implicated in human rights abuses in the Global South<sup>26</sup>. I argued in Chapter 4, building on the work of Kleinman & Kleinman (1996), that images of suffering and victimization can constitute damaging hierarchies even as they may seem to superficially alleviate human rights abuses. Finally, these shaming and boomerang models view media primarily as a channel of

communication that widens the population of those willing to act, rather than seeing media production as act in itself. Although some researchers have noted how media enables activist networks to form by forging connections between populations (Melucci 1996, Tarrow 2005), these submerged networks theories also fail to recognize the way that media production can be a direct political act in itself.

McLagan (2003) argues that human rights media have been neglected in anthropological literature partly because of a tendency to see media as conduits for information without their own “logic and power that are constitutive of thought, identity, and action” (2003: 605). However, she goes on to argue that “human rights activists make ethical claims through media and these media operate by making ethical claims on us” (2003: 606). Through these claims, human rights media create “witnessing publics” of people who come to feel some responsibility (or shame, or guilt) for those who are suffering. In other words, although McLagan argues human rights media are constitutive, her description of how they operate as a social and political force continues to separate communication from action.

In order to see human rights videos as a constitutive political and social field, it is necessary to examine what is meant by the difference between ‘action’ and ‘communication’. The shaming or boomerang models of human rights media imply that taking action involves formal political steps within institutions (either NGOs or governments). However, as I have argued previously, this is a very limiting conception of political action and social change. These formal legal channels are only partially available to marginal populations, and even where they are successful (as in the 2009 Supreme Court human rights decision) they are often unsatisfactory.

I argue that films create a field of social and political action that opens a wide range of creative political activities that help to crystallize (or articulate (Hall 1996)) a political community (or network (Juris 2008)). Victims of abuses act through telling their stories, filmmakers act through recording and compiling them, and others act through copying and distributing the film or organizing screenings. Years after films are made, they are used as a “calling card” introduction to the community<sup>27</sup>, and public screenings form the basis of political meetings and commemorations. Films are reproduced thousands of times, re-edited for different purposes, and become part of a collective local memory.

These political practices may not be considered ‘action’ according to communications models because they do not change laws or institutional policies. However, to those who practice these activities, they represent political work that is more productive than acting through formal institutional legal pathways. Making and distributing films creates opportunities for practicing *compañerismo*, creates a theater of dramatic confrontation, and helps to build social, political, and economic structures. Furthermore, it does these things through human relationships and practices, regardless of the specific discourse, ideology, or language of the films. As I argued in the last chapter, filmmakers are very literally producing a *medium* of human interactions—a substrate or a context—that helps *produce a culture* of non-capitalism. In addition to producing discourse and mediating messages, films operate on a social level of human interaction, creating social, economic, and political structures that are culturally transformative.

Another way of conceiving of this constitutive arena (or field of action, or culture) is as a ‘counterpublic’. Building on and refining Fraser’s (1992) work on ‘subaltern counterpublics’, Warner argues that “a counterpublic maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of

its subordinate status. The cultural horizon against which it marks itself off is not just a general or wider public, but a dominant one” (2002: 85). Warner goes on to characterize these dominant publics as “by definition those that can take their discourse pragmatics and their lifeworlds for granted, misrecognizing the indefinite scope of their expansive address as universality or normalcy” (2002: 88).

The founder and director of *canalseisdejulio*, Carlos Mendoza, for example, considers that his production company produces *contrainformación*, or counter-information, that corrects and debates the information that the mass media presents (2007, personal communication). Mendoza’s counter-information and Warner’s counterpublics follow the organization and concerns of social movements of the twentieth century: social movements primarily relying on a conception of ‘resistance’ that works against dominant, hegemonic publics.

Taken in a Gramscian (1992) framework, one might say that a counterpublic is engaged in a struggle for hegemony. Gramscian theory is deeply committed to an idea of resistance. Under a resistance framework, there is always hierarchy and there is always a process of domination. ‘Resistance practices’ have been cultivated through the Marxist tradition of a critique of industrial capitalism and are closely tied to labor union struggles. Its practices are meant to impede processes in order to emphasize the degree to which the consent or coercion of everyday, working people is needed in order for political and economic processes to work smoothly. Resistance practices include political marches, sit-ins, traffic blockades, and strikes. These practices are conversant with hegemonic processes of domination; the ‘way out’ of always being subordinate is to become dominant. However, as I argued in Chapter 3, *compañerismo* is deeply skeptical of any process of domination and hierarchy. ‘Winning’ a battle for hegemony



would imply an intolerable degree of protagonismo. Becoming dominant does not do away with hierarchy and oppression, it just displaces it.

An ‘autonomy strategy’ does not seek out hegemony, does not wish to dominate anyone, and wishes to avoid conversation with hegemonic processes. ‘Autonomy practices’ are small daily practices that when added together make the state and corporate capitalism less relevant to one’s life. These practices include making small collective and self-sustaining living and working arrangements, forming independent and alternative channels for communication, independent marketplaces, and in general building infrastructures and a political economy of an alternative society. Rather than working through creating tension with a dominant or hegemonic public in efforts to change it, autonomy strategies work by intensive organizational efforts from within a movement that strengthen it as a collectivity. To use a slogan of World Social Forum, a social movement deeply engaged in autonomy practices, “another world is possible”.

In theorizing autonomy practices, I do not wish to pose challenges to theories of hegemonic struggle; autonomy practices arise out of hegemonic struggle. Instead, I argue that the conception is useful in theorizing pragmatic attempts of collectivities to remove themselves from a hegemonic struggle that they do not think that they can win, and to which they do not wish to relinquish themselves. Autonomy strategy is a ‘way out’ that does not wish to ‘win’; it is only autonomous in the sense of its refusal to engage with hegemonic processes on their own terms.

There is significant overlap between autonomy practices and the practices of creating an ethical disposition of *compañerismo* and non-capitalist economies. The practices of gifting, screening, and selling documentary films are all autonomy practices. Each of these practices attempts to build an alternate, non-capitalist economy that is not subordinate to the dominant

capitalist economy, but is as separate from it as possible. The practices of *compañerismo* are also autonomy practices. They seek to create a moral economy of selflessness and collectivity that is not subordinate to neoliberal regimes of governmentality and individual citizenship, but simply apart from it. The struggle to contain and discipline *protagonismo* is a struggle against tendencies to engage with hegemonic processes of domination.

I do not wish to overstate the distinction between ‘autonomy’ and ‘resistance’ as a binary opposition. They exist simultaneously in the Frente and in each member’s political practices. There are efforts to build the Frente through autonomy work: making peoples’ lives less dependent on corporate capitalism, expanding its network, and creatively producing the culture of a social movement and a place in which its members want to spend time. There are also efforts to resist government intrusion: taking over local government offices, marching to Mexico City, and fighting back against the police. Autonomy practices and resistance practices are not mutually exclusive. The development of an acephalous social structure (Scott 2009), for instance, is both a sincere attempt to construct a more egalitarian society for its own purposes, and a strategic attempt to resist state repression and appropriation.

Nevertheless, making a distinction between these two forms of practices is productive for three reasons. First, because it describes a shift in political strategy and practices. As resistance practices become less effective, and as people become convinced that the state cannot be brought into conversation, autonomy practices become more prevalent and seem more productive. In the wake of the incredible violence of May 2006 for example, many people were afraid to continue to participate in resistance activities for fear of violent retribution. They wanted a break from creating tension with the state. In addition, the violence fractured Atenco as a community and the Frente as a movement. A great deal of work needed to happen in order to put the pieces back

together. Beto began giving communications workshops to young people, teaching them how to produce sound and video. Other members began agricultural projects involving organic vegetables, farm-raised carp, and spirulina projects (a nutritional form of algae) to increase the productivity of the land. The Frente put efforts into supporting a dance troupe [*manzana*] at the annual carnival celebrations, and hosting solidarity “cultural and social performances” in the center of Atenco involving dances and plays. All of these activities were uplifting, creative practices that helped to build strength and self-sufficiency. They helped to fortify the Frente without creating tension with the state. Conceiving of these practices in terms of autonomy practice enables us to view them as actions taken up purposefully as part of a political strategy of finding a ‘way out’ without incurring further violence.

Second, I suggest that the distinction between autonomy and resistance helps us to understand a greater articulation of these practices and strategies with a tradition of anarchist organizing than with a tradition of Marxist organizing. Scholars interested in contemporary transnational social movements argue that there is a palpable shift toward anarchist ideologies, organizational strategies, and utopian imaginaries in the sphere of contemporary social movements (Graeber 2004, Juris 2009). Juris argues of the transnational movements against corporate capitalism that:

The dominant spirit behind this emerging political praxis can broadly be defined as anarchist...Classic anarchist principles such as autonomy, self-management, federation, direct action, and direct democracy are among the most important values for today’s radicals (Juris 2008:15).

Juris uses the concept of “autonomous spaces” to describe the emerging structure of networked, transnational anti-corporate capitalist movements from around the world (of which the Frente forms a part). He uses the term to describe how distinct, autonomous social

movements have their own internal organizational commitments and processes, but come together in larger, transnational forums to form a network of practice. He uses the term to describe how social movements are autonomous from one another within a network. I use the term to describe the importance of internal social movement processes that are not in direct dialogue with the state. However, the concepts both have their roots in anarchist organizing.

Third, thinking in terms of autonomy and resistance is a helpful framework for parsing through the complexity of tensions between social practice and rational discourse in contemporary documentary film. How can we understand the social, political, and cultural consequences of films that seem to name, try, and convict perpetrators of human rights abuses at the same time that no one involved in producing such a document believes that it will help to do these things? How can we understand a social praxis that is deeply committed to *compañerismo* at the same time that it also seems deeply committed to a language of individual human rights?

In order to answer these questions and better understand how autonomy practices came to be a primary point of reference for Mexican social movements, I would like to turn toward a brief genealogy of a social movement called *La Otra Campaña*. Although the movement toward autonomy practices was articulated in different ways throughout transnational social movement networks, *La Otra Campaña* was very influential in how this conception was developed and articulated in Mexico.

## **6.2 LA OTRA CAMPAÑA**

The shift in transnational anti-globalization social movements from resistance strategy to autonomy strategy can be seen very clearly in contrasting the tone of the first World Social

Forum meeting in 2001 in Porto Alegre, Brazil (organized against the World Economic Forum meetings in Davos, Switzerland) with the second meetings a year later. As Santiago (2007) argues, these first meetings were about what was *wrong* with economic globalization and establishing what the WSF would be *against*. The slogan of the second meeting was “Another World is Possible,” a phrase that she argues

liberated ourselves from thinking that we were victims, or worse, tinkers—people who would tinker with the edges of globalization to somehow make it work for people who were not the Davos types. We would ourselves define our world!” (Santiago 2007: xv).

Even though these meetings were a very important point of reference for autonomy strategies throughout the world, the World Social Forum did not invent contemporary conceptions of autonomy practice used in anti-capitalist social movements, nor were these meetings the most important point of articulation of this concept in Mexico.

More important in Mexico was the 2005 declaration of the EZLN (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, or Zapatista Army of National Liberation), called The Sixth Declaration from the Lacandón Jungle (EZLN 2005). This document had antecedents in the WTO protests of 1999 and 2003 (Juris 2008), the World Social Forum (Waterman & Sen 2007), and the open source software movement (Halleck 2002, Kidd 2003). In a circular pathway of influence, all three of these large-scale protests and movements also found antecedents in the original Zapatista uprising in 1994 (Coyer 2005). The experiences of the Frente from 2002 also influenced this new generation of Zapatismo. Several central figures of the Frente attended the initial organizational meetings in 2005, as one of their goals during this time was to build relationships with other movements working against neoliberal globalization.

After intensive organizational meetings, The Sixth Declaration formed a conglomeration of social movements called *La Otra Campaña* [The Other Campaign]. The name “La Otra” came to evoke the “otherness” of the campaign, making something that was apart and different. It also evoked the “otherness” of those who are usually left out of civil society and political decisions: the otherness of indigenous peoples, rebel teenagers, queer people (Anonymous 2005). Much like the Black Power movement or the Queer movement, *La Otra Campaña* attempted to reclaim the terms of marginalization. However, instead of reclaiming one characteristic (skin color, sexual orientation), it reclaimed the idea of marginality itself, turning otherness into unity, and disenfranchisement into autonomy. Much like I have argued that the commitment to collectivity of *compañerismo* does not articulate around one single identity, the ‘otherness’ of *La Otra* was elusive and multiple. *La Otra Campaña* meant to unite all of these “others” to create an alternative universe that could be autonomous from the mainstream one, much in the same way that the autonomous communities in Chiapas had built their own society from the ground up, organizing themselves, making their own rules, and governing their own communities.

The relationship between *La Otra Campaña* and the Frente was very close in 2005 and 2006<sup>28</sup>. When the famous pipe-smoking, masked spokesman of the EZLN, Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, came to Mexico City as part of *La Otra Campaña*, the Frente provided security for him. *La Otra Campaña* held a large rally in Atenco the week before the May 2006 attack, and it was largely members of *La Otra Campaña* who rushed to Atenco on the evening of May 3<sup>rd</sup> 2006 in solidarity, just in time for the repression. Members of both the Frente and *La Otra Campaña* both told me in interviews that they believed that the attack was aimed at both social movements.

As a result, all of the films made in the 2006-2010 era of the Frente were made by collectives and production companies who shared members with La Otra Campaña. Cristina, the filmmaker quoted above, was a self-identified member of La Otra Campaña in 2008 when I asked her if her film collective produced counter-information along the lines of *canalseisdejulio*:

No. I don't think so. Because this is to give a kind of validity to the information of the other, as if that one was the good [one] and we were the opposite, or the counter-informers. I personally think that what it is about is to generate our own media, our own networks, our own channels, our own professional codes for our information, for our information needs. So I think that to say "counter information" is to place yourself – like counter culture too, it's the same concept – to place yourself not only against, but outside, below.

Here, Cristina articulates quite clearly the difference between using filmmaking as a practice in resistance to hegemony and using it as a practice of autonomy. La Otra Campaña was uninterested in taking over or impeding the operations of mainstream institutions. It strove to be simply unconcerned with them and make its own institutions that operated according to a different political economy. The difficulty of seeing La Otra Campaña as building a counterpublic in Warner's sense is that it immediately defined itself both as an alternative to the dominant public, but also never subordinate to it or even desirous of becoming part of it. Warner ends his characterization of publics by relating them to social movements:

This is one of the things that happen when alternative publics are cast as social movements—they acquire agency in relation to the state. They enter the temporality of politics and adapt themselves to the performatives of rational-critical discourse. For many counterpublics, to do so is to cede the original hope of transforming, not just policy, but the space of public life itself. (Warner 2002: 89)

In other words, as Warner's media counterpublics become social movements (see also Melucci 1989) they force themselves into dialogue with the state and mainstream discourse. In doing so, they give up their hopes of transforming "the space of public life". La Otra Campaña

sought to deny normative rational-critical discourse with the state, and preserve its transformative potential. It sought to transform the space of public life through *not* entering into rational-critical discourse with the state and by remaining autonomous, or ‘other’.

If the Atenco human rights documentaries weren’t meant to prosecute perpetrators however, why did they use the language of human rights abuses? How did the shift from resistance strategy to autonomy strategy play out in the context of filmmaking? What kind of political work did filmmakers imagine their films doing and what kind of political work did they do? I turn now to the case of the 2006 human rights documentary *Romper el Cerco* (canalseisdejulio & Promedios).

### **6.3 ROMPER EL CERCO [BREAKING THE SIEGE]**

Two important Mexican film production groups came together to produce the most widely distributed human rights documentary about Atenco, *Romper el Cerco* (canalseisdejulio & Promedios 2006)<sup>29</sup>. Canalseisdejulio<sup>30</sup> is the best-known social documentary film producer in Mexico. The company began by providing “counter-information” for the 1988 presidential elections in Mexico (which took place on July 6<sup>th</sup>, giving them their name: Channel July 6). Thirty years later, canalseisdejulio’s founder and director, Carlos Mendoza, is a professor of documentary film in the CUEC (the Centro Universitario de Educación Cinematográfica or the University Center of Cinematographic Education) within the national university.

The economy of canalseisdejulio is revealing of their level of professionalization and their relationships with social movements. Mendoza and his producer, Nancy Ventura, ‘employ’ more than a dozen people, most of whom are current or past students at the CUEC. These



members work without salaries on a volunteer basis, remunerated with what its manager terms “stipends” [*apoyos*]. Mendoza also states that he would prefer to make money off of its films rather than give them away for free. They are a for-profit company. Canalseisdejulio is politically motivated, but does not explicitly ally itself with any particular social movement and has worked on a contract basis with unions and human rights organizations.

Even so, they don’t make much profit and cannot afford to pay their ‘employees’ very much. Part of this has to do with the networks of sharing in the spirit of *compañerismo* and the street vendors I described previously. There is a statement before each of their films (where an FBI warning might be) stating that they appreciate the hard work that video pirates do in disseminating their products, but “it is only fair that those who are pirating our work, and profiting from our efforts, return part of that income to *canalseisdejulio*” (canalseisdejulio 2009, emphasis in original). The statement reveals the narrow and sometimes deeply contradictory line that they walk between capitalist and non-capitalist economies of distribution. At the same time that they wish to make money off of their films, they use the framework of *compañerismo* to criticize pirates for making money off of them.

In early May 2006, director Carlos Mendoza and producer Nancy Ventura were on vacation and absent from its offices. The company was left in the hands of Mario Viveros, a former student of Mendoza’s who had been with the organization since 1999. Viveros took the initiative to make the *Atenco* film. It was under his direction that *Romper el Cerco* was produced and distributed in a very different way than most canalseisdejulio films, and signified a significant break from the organization’s usual model of filmmaking and distributing.

According to Viveros, he and others were listening to the coverage of Ignacio de Valle's arrest on the radio on May 3<sup>rd</sup> 2006 as they edited another project. Viveros sent a cameraperson to go record in Atenco early the next morning. Viveros commented:

We didn't know what was going to happen, but we suspected that something could happen...Some minutes before we arrived, the police were already entering. So it happened that we saw the live [televised] transmission of how the police entered and beat the guys [*chavos*] up.

Canalseisdejulio was not the only group recording that morning. The French filmmaker Nico DeFossé had been working with the media organization Promedios: Comunicación Comunitaria [Pro-Media: Communitarian Communication] since 2001. Promedios is an organization that provides video equipment and training to the autonomous (Zapatista protected) communities in Chiapas. DeFossé helped edit many of these projects, and in 2005 had received a grant from the French government that allowed him to purchase a camera and some recording equipment. The original idea was for people from the autonomous communities to use this equipment to follow La Otra Campaña and record their activities. This proved to be difficult however, and instead DeFossé, along with a long-time colleague of his, took turns recording the events of the campaign. DeFossé told me that for him and others following the La Otra Campaña, the scene on the highway on May 3<sup>rd</sup> "hit us really hard" because of the solidarity building between the Frente and the Campaign, as well as the increasing number of clashes with police as La Otra Campaña held events closer to Mexico City.

DeFossé and his colleague, along with a small van full of independent reporters, went to Atenco early in the morning of the 4<sup>th</sup>. The team from canalseisdejulio and from Promedios recognized one another that morning from work that they had done together on a few films about Zapatistas. They knew one another were recording, but at first canalseisdejulio had no thought

of doing a documentary. They simply went to record to gather material for their extensive archive. Viveros describes how they decided to make a film:

I remember that we were in a moment of- a little rediscovery of the internet, so we were looking for all of the information [about the Atenco police repression] on the internet that Medios Libres publishes, and Indy Media, etcetera, etcetera. And we began to find much more information. And we thought we could do something very small, like five minutes, a denunciation, and upload it to the internet page. This was the first idea that we had. Later, in some moment in the afternoon, I saw... a list of *desaparecidos*, of people who were missing; I found the name of Valentina Palma. And this was the trigger for doing *Romper el Cerco*. Valentina Palma is a compañera, a film student. I've known her since '98 or '99.

Palma's detention was significant to Viveros because she had almost been detained while filming the WTO protests in Cancun in 2001. The police removed her from the scene and released her because she claimed to be a tourist. Seeing her name on the list, Viveros knew that she wasn't so lucky this time.

So when I see the name of Valentina Palma, the Chilean, lost there, I said, "Fuck [*puta*]. Valentina doesn't know how to react in the face of eventualities like that." She isn't the one who runs the fastest. She doesn't know how to react. So I said, "Oh, my god, [*la torre*], no." ... It took on a more personal nature. It is someone you know. It is someone, in addition, with whom you share an occupation. And the first thing [I thought] was, "if it affects her, it affects all of us" [*si la tocan a ella, nos tocan a nosotros*]. So this has to be denounced quickly.

Viveros also knew that the consequences would be severe for Palma because she was not a Mexican Citizen. It is illegal in Mexico for foreigners to demonstrate against the government, and if she were arrested during a political action, she could be deported and be unable to return to the country for five years. This would also mean that she would lose her place as a student in the CCC (Centro de Capacitación Cinematográfico, or the Center for Cinematographic Capacitation)<sup>31</sup>.

Viveros's experiences of filming previous protests and the network of face-to-face relationships he had cultivated as a result of these filming practices played a large role in his

reaction to the violence in Atenco and his motivation for organizing further on behalf of La Otra Campaña and the Frente. His work with the Zapatistas in the 1990s brought him into contact with DeFossé, and his coverage of the 2001 protests in Cancun brought him into contact with Palma. These personal, face-to-face relationships with filmmakers from France and Chile were brought to bear viscerally and pragmatically in the case of Atenco. The film was not simply about Atenco; it was about transnational networks of anti-globalization social movements and independent media producers. Furthermore, a *compañera*, a fellow social filmmaker in solidarity with social movements had been captured. Viveros wanted to do the right thing as a *compañero* and help her.

Since he knew that people from Promedios were also at the scene and had footage, Viveros contacted DeFossé through another shared contact and invited him to use the equipment and resources of *canalseisdejulio* to help put together a denunciation. Viveros describes this collaborative process:

So Nico came and brought a whole group of guys from other places who came with footage [*material*]. So we began to make a network, we began to share material. I began to use contacts from the *canal* to get more material, like Univision, like La Jornada ... And we began to put it together [*armarlo*]. The proposal was to put together an exercise of five or ten minutes to do a quick denunciation on the internet. ... And a lot of information started to come out. A lot of people began to collaborate. So the project started to transcend ... It was a video that came out three weeks later in the beginning of June, the end of May. And was 45 minutes long. So someone came from Indy Media, did a lot of experiments, and in the end we were able to upload it to the web. And it became a very cool phenomenon. The web began to work.

DeFossé agreed that the open collaboration and collective work on the project was a strength:

From being on the [La Otra Campaña] tour, we had the network of alternative media. So there were *compañeros* who gave me images of inside [Atenco] on the 4<sup>th</sup> in the early morning ... And later word gets around that we're doing this

video. People even came without us asking, to leave more material ... There is a collective dimension of this work that is very strong. ... It was a lot of people and the process was very beautiful [*bonito*]. ... The little rivalries that there are in whichever medium, [and] that are here too, even though they are activist media [were put aside]. There was a lot of collaboration here.

The film came about as a result of face-to-face solidarities and networks formed through the practice of making social documentary films about other social movements, and terminated by cementing more solidarities among different media producers who previously did not know one another. The practice of working together in collaboration without regard to profit, personal recognition, or self-gain was a powerful one for all those I spoke with about the project. This high level of *compañerismo* impacted the film and its numerous producers.

The larger theme of the film came about as a compromise between DeFossé and Viveros. If *canalseisdejulio* were doing the film by themselves, Viveros told me, it would have concentrated more on the repression as a government strategy to scare people away from voting for the center left party (the Partido Revolucionario Democrático, or PRD) in the upcoming elections. If *Promedios* were doing the film by itself, DeFossé told me, it would have concentrated more on the repression of *La Otra Campaña* and other social movements<sup>32</sup>. Through the collaboration, the film came to speak on common ground, making an argument about the role of the media in criminalizing social movements and naming those responsible for the human rights violations.

The production process of *Romper el Cerco* involved a lot of people, most of whom were in some way involved with *La Otra Campaña* and the *IndyMedia* movement. The group of a younger generation of independent filmmakers and journalists in their twenties and thirties (who grew up watching the more traditional films of *canalseisdejulio*) came together to make a film that was in the style of *canalseisdejulio* and utilized the language of human rights and contra-

information, but used the new autonomous and anti-capitalist practices of *compañerismo* and non-capitalist economies.

The question still remains however, if this large amalgamation of producers did not imagine the film working to decrease the impunity of the police, punish perpetrators of violence, or get their friends out of jail, how did they imagine the film working as a political force?

#### 6.4 THREE SIEGES

Viveros told me that there are three “sieges” to which the title of *Romper el Cerco* [Breaking the Siege] refers: a siege of biased national media, a physical siege of social movements (preventing them from acting), and a third siege created from the first two: a siege of fear. “The fear that provokes you, that paralyzes you,” he told me in 2008.

[*Romper el Cerco*] was a call to the people to say, ‘Let’s break the fear, let’s break the misleading propaganda of the electronic media, and let’s break the siege of the fear of the police too.’ In moments [like this] that are so critical, that are so strong, you become a little more militant. ... Suddenly you are like, ‘Let’s call to action,’ and the action was, ‘Don’t be afraid.’ It has to be said. It has to be denounced. One can’t let these things repeat in this country. This was the motivation to do this video.

It is striking that Viveros intended the film to make people less afraid because the great majority of the content of the film argues, in horrifying detail, the level of devious, conspiratorial, murderous retribution that the state is prepared to bring down on innocent citizens and well-meaning social movements. However, Viveros goes on to explain how he feels that this film broke these sieges:

If you don’t do anything, if you stay there in silence, the only thing that it does is allow everything to go on with impunity. We become accomplices. ... After Atenco, to go out in the street with a camera isn’t the same. ... They shoot at cameras now. This wasn’t seen in Mexico before. ... We can’t allow this. We couldn’t stay silent as documentarians, could we?

Viveros's argument reveals that the very existence of the documentary, apart from the specificity of its language, communicated to the state that the repression did not act to silence independent media. He conceives of the film as communicating "don't be afraid" because the existence of the film is a brave act of resistance that occurred immediately after the horrific physical violence repressed the activities of several social movements who were in Atenco on May 4<sup>th</sup>. However, there is an important aspect to his vision for how the film works as a political action that goes beyond 'resisting' the state.

Vivero's language in referring to the audience of the film reveals that he conceives of this audience as part of the same population (including himself) that was repressed on May 4<sup>th</sup>. The film is not directed primarily at the state, or to international 'outside' audiences that might help to adjudicate human rights abuses, but to an international 'inside' network of social movements and independent media producers that 1) wanted to know what was going on behind the 'siege' of biased media coverage, 2) faced physical lines of police that prevented them from acting, and 3) might be afraid because of the mediatic and physical barriers erected against them. This aspect of how Viveros saw the film working has as much to do with communicating to and inspiring an 'inside' population as converting or acting against an 'outside' population.

The name "Breaking the Siege" was suggested by a man in his 50s named José Luis Mariño who, in 2006, was helping to distribute authorized copies of *canalseisdejulio* DVDs. In 2008, I asked him why *canalseisdejulio* was important:

It makes horizontal communication. It allows citizens to sometimes get to know each other, or they learn things they didn't know...It is where more people are participating, where most of the young people are in politics and culture. ... That is to say, that we are working with the symbols and little by little we are making a small space, a new imaginary, a new conception of reality, a different kind of common sense.

In Mariño's account, we can see a very different conception of canalseisdejulio's work than is evident in Mendoza's conception of counter-information. According to Mariño, and echoing Viveros, this work is not primarily important because it resists hegemonic processes or helps to transform laws, policies, or the behavior of violent perpetrators. It is important because filmmaking is a positive, creative, horizontal force that is building new spaces and new imaginaries. In short, it is helping to create partial autonomies through creative participation in politics.

In part, this conceptualization of how films work as political forces is the result of a pragmatism developed over decades of seeing the social consequences of social documentaries and a degree of pessimism about democratic process in Mexico and a history of impunity for perpetrators of violence. Viveros asserts that:

It's not going to be a documentary that changes things, but it is a lot of things that make change: media, [text] messages, e-mails. What they do is that the collective consciousness is veering, is changing [*vaya virando, vaya cambiando*]. Mexico is a country of impunity where they never punish anything. Nevertheless, in the collective consciousness, the [student protest] killings in '68 were the fault of Echeverría and Diaz Ordaz [the incoming and outgoing Presidents], and of the army. The [student protest] killings of '71 too. Digna Ochoa [a human rights lawyer and religious] was killed [in 2000], she didn't commit suicide [as the state claims], and those that are at fault are the same in Atenco, the police, not the macheteros [those with machetes].

For Viveros, formal institutional justice for human rights abuses might be a desired goal, but is unrealistic. The Supreme Court case trying the abuses (and for which the film *Romper el Cerco* was entered as evidence according to one of the lawyers trying the case), but which ultimately held no individuals accountable for the abuses, proved Viveros's assumption to be correct. Instead, the films about police violence in 1968, 1971, and 2006 and about Digna Ochoa's murder (all topics of canalseisdejulio films) are adjudicated in a collective



consciousness of the networks of social movements that is independent from the state and legal structures. This collective consciousness can be seen as the same “different kind of common sense” that Mariño speaks of above. Both describe a collectivity of people that is autonomous from a mainstream public. This public can be seen to be “counter” according to Warner’s conception in that it is articulated partially by ideas that run counter to the mainstream. However, it is not defined by its opposition, but by a creative, positive, independent definition of (collective) self.

Both Mariño and Viveros use the conception of ‘consciousness’ in a way that is clearly influenced by Marxian theories of how media might awaken peoples’ consciousness. However, a closer inspection will reveal that their use does not imply a false consciousness (based on identification with an oppressor) and a true consciousness (based on class identification). Instead it is a deeply processual, praxis-oriented conception of consciousness that implies collective work towards building something new and unknown: Mariño’s “new conception of reality” and Vivero’s “veering”, “changing.”

*Romper el Cerco* represents a deep engagement with both resistance practices and autonomy practices. However, seeing it exclusively in the light of resistance practices, counter-information, or creating a counter-public obscures how it also a constitutive arena for action that helped to articulate and address an independent, autonomous public. Furthermore, this public is transnational in scope (involving at least US, French, Mexican, and Chilean citizens), but is not imagined as a powerful ‘outside’ audience that might be convinced to help. Instead, its audience is imagined as an ‘inside,’ horizontal public of peers or *compañeros*.

In the next section, I show how this impression of *Romper el Cerco*’s public comes to mean that members of the Frente who have never picked up a video camera or used Final Cut

Pro consider themselves part of the production team of Atenco films. This unique characteristic of alternative/community/citizens media—that poses challenges to distinctions between audiences and producers—has been well documented elsewhere (see Downing 1984, Rodríguez 2001, Atton 2002). In this last section, I bring the discussion of film back to the Frente to show how seeing oneself as a ‘producer’ is an important part of how film becomes a constitutive social and cultural arena. In this arena, cultivating *compañerismo*, making structural violence visible, creating non-capitalist economies, and practicing autonomy become practices in producing culture.

## **6.5 WE MADE THAT FILM; THERE IS NO FILMMAKER**

Don Jesus, a member of the Frente in his sixties, and I chatted idly, waiting for our mutual friend to return. In the course of conversation, I asked him if he had seen the documentary films made about the Frente. “Seen them?!” he asked, shocked. “I made them!” Asking further which of the films he had made, it became clear that in the usual sense of the word, this man was not a filmmaker. He never picked up a video camera or sat down at a computer to edit. What he meant was that he helped to bring about the events that are portrayed in the documentaries. He was on screen, participating and helping to direct the action in the streets. In his mind, this was a production role at least as important as the roles of those behind the cameras and computers. In his view, the filmmakers merely recorded actions that they saw. He was part of the action. Without him there would have been no films.

On another occasion, I was in Maria’s household when she was showing a group of her visiting grandchildren *Romper el Cerco*. Discussing the film afterwards with her and her family, I mentioned that I knew the filmmakers who shot and edited most of it. Maria was visibly

confused by this information. She explained that I couldn't know the filmmaker because there wasn't one. She explained that the footage was shot by dozens of different people and compiled as raw footage on a DVD before it was edited first by one person and then by another person until it solidified slowly into its present form. I explained about *canalseisdejulio* and *Promedios*, but she would not be convinced. To her, this film had no filmmaker other than the people who created the action we saw on the screen, people inseparable from those who shot and edited the film.

In this amplified sense of production, very close to the sense articulated by Don Jesus, it is the social movement itself, as a collective actor, who produces the film. The individuals who held cameras, conducted interviews, and made editing decisions become invisible or non-existent as individuals separate from the action on the screen. This broad conception of who made the films means that the production team of Atenco films becomes impossibly large. Coupled with the impression that these films are mostly only seen by people who are already allies of the Frente, this large production team also means that (depending on how broadly one conceives of the collective actor on the screen) the audience of the film may consist almost entirely of its own producers.

Throughout my time with the Frente, many urban members of La Otra Campaña expressed to me their frustration with *autoconsumo* (self-consumption), an expression that might be compared to the English phrase, 'preaching to the choir.' DeFossé, for example, told me that occasionally people who didn't already know about Atenco see *Romper el Cerco*, but that mostly "what happens is that these projections stay in the same circle of people as always, that certainly doesn't need to be convinced." The concern with "staying in the same circle" is that only people who already belong to the movement and are convinced of its cause consume the media from La

Otra Campaña and its associated social movements. However, I never heard these complaints from anyone from the Frente.

In 2009, I asked Beto if he believes that his efforts with the Commission were successful:

I think that the social process is complex. The thing is that you are getting consciousness, and the community is also. Your individual participation and your private consciousness [is forming], but the community itself is developing collective consciousness ... re-encountering itself, valuing [itself]. ... The thing is that we have to learn as a commission to try to transmit to the interior and the exterior. To remind ourselves, and remind the people, that there we are, that we exist, and that we are not going to let up.

For Beto, making films has been a journey of developing his own political consciousness, as well as helping his community develop a collective consciousness of valuing itself. For Beto, this is a long, continual, collaborative process that works toward an indefinite end. “Consciousness” is not something that you ‘get’ through film, but something that you develop and slowly form through participation and practice. Filmmaking for Beto has been a process of building an idea of himself (or his self) and his community building an idea of *itself* as an independent, autonomous ‘we’.

He claims that the internal consumption of the Commission’s films is as important, if not more so, as their distribution to outsiders. In fact, the great majority of those who see these films already identify them as about themselves. This can be quite literal, like Doña Maria, who watches a DVD and says to her family, “Look, there I am in this shot!” It can also be more figurative in the sense of Don Jesus, who identifies himself as part of the group portrayed on the screen: “This film is about my community, my social movement, my politics.” In both cases, the spectator is watching him or herself on the screen. Because of the distribution networks of social documentary films, they are almost always screened or distributed in environments that are sympathetic to social movements. This means that it is very unlikely that those unfamiliar with

these social movements will come across them, and if they do, they will be accompanied by interpersonal interactions that place the film in a human context. They will be in a small audience in a coffee shop, in a town square filled with the activities of a social movement, or in the living room of a friend. Beto does not define success by how many people have seen the Frente's films. He describes success as an internal process of self-discovery and determination.

There was only one member of the Frente who refused my request to interview him outright when asked. Since he seemed critical of my project in general, I asked him if there was ever a use for researchers such as myself for the Frente. "No," he replied, "Everyone who needs to know about the Frente already knows." This was an attitude corroborated by many people who also quite openly granted me interviews. They didn't feel that there was much harm in answering my questions, but didn't think I could do much to help the Frente either. After discussing this at length with Virgilio, I found that this counter-intuitive insularity is based on two factors: 1) Dealing with outsiders is dangerous. They may be spies, government officials, or people wishing to disrupt the movement rather than help it. 2) There were enough people associated with the movement coming from a variety of positions that self-organization and self-knowledge was a substantial challenge.

This same exclusivity of knowledge applied to the Frente's media. The Frente was unconcerned with "preaching to the choir" with their media because they knew the choir needed quite a bit of organizing and when the time came, would speak for itself in political marches, rallies, and court cases. The concern about autoconsumo comes from a model of resistance work in which a movement is always working to push against the normative and their target audience is always the outside, the unconvinced, the enemy. Using this model of political organizing, there is always convincing and fighting with the outside to do and "preaching to the choir" is a

problem because wider audiences are not being reached. In contrast, the focus of autonomy work is inward, to self-organize, self-educate, and build a strong community from within. Within the conceptual framework of autonomy, autoconsumo is not a liability, but a strength. It takes advantage of the “self-making” (Ginsburg 1991) potential of community media to show community members who they are as a group and what they have accomplished.

There is significant blurring between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ in this case, involving many layers of interlocking associations with other social movements and communities. The context of Beto’s quote above indicates that he would likely place members of La Otra Campaña from Mexico City in the ‘exterior’ category he mentions, even though this population is still comprised of social movement ‘insiders,’ because they are not from the community of the Frente. For him, the La Otra Campaña members from Mexico City (and the population most likely to complain about autoconsumo) *are* the exterior population they are attempting to reach. They simply don’t consider themselves outsiders because they identify so closely with the Frente and the people they see in the films. They identify with them so much, and relate their struggle to their own lives and struggles to the point that they do not see themselves as an exterior audience, but as insiders and producer/subjects of the films rather than its target audience.

At film screenings, one can watch this process happen in the matter of a few hours. At the end of 2008, I attended the première of a film called “*Atenco Two Years Later*” [Atenco a dos años] (Kolectivo Klamvé 2008) in the cultural center of Coyoacán (a very trendy and traditionally left-leaning neighborhood in Mexico City). The first question after the film ended came from a middle-aged man who stood up and spoke with emotion as he explained he hadn’t seen a documentary about Atenco before, only what he read about in the newspapers, and he was incensed. “How can I help you distribute these films?” he asked, “Everyone I know should

watch this.” This man was not alone in being moved by one of the Atenco documentaries. I regularly attended film screenings in a wide variety of venues throughout my fieldwork, and if there were a question-and-answer portion to the screening, at least one person would express a very similar sentiment.

What is significant about this man’s reaction (and others) is that his first impulse is not to ask, “Who can I write to change this situation?” or “Where can I donate money to support political prisoners?” or even “How can I volunteer to help organize against such injustice?” One of these reactions would indicate that the documentary acted on him as an audience member and inspired him to act as a citizen. Instead, his reaction pertained to the documentary itself; the documentary acted on him and inspired him to act as a distributor of the film. At no moment was he part of the film’s audience in any traditional sense of the word. He walked into the screening a stranger, and walked out of the screening as part of its production team. The very next day this man might offer the film to his friends, be rejected by those who have negative feelings about Atenco, and become frustrated because of autoconsumo.

The autonomous, non-capitalist economy of *compañerismo* in which these films are embedded creates this intimate relationship with their ‘public’. It is because they are not property, do not make money, and do not seem to have directors, distributors, or owners of any kind that they invite co-ownership as *compañeros* in struggle. In this way, *compañerismo* is reproduced in practice through social, mediated, face-to-face relationships. The use of dramatic confrontations in films that make perpetrators and mechanisms of violence visible are important because they allow people to identify hierarchies and domination in their own lives and through their own practices. This alternative economy of practice helps form partial autonomies from the state and corporate capitalism and aiding in a creative process of (collective) self-formation in

which people use documentary film as an arena for the production of a partially autonomous non-capitalist culture.



## CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

In the summer of 2010, the Frente entered a new phase of organizing when the criminal charges were dropped against Nacho del Valle, the other political prisoners, and those still in hiding. ‘Atenco’ returned to headlines in the national presidential elections of 2012 when a group of college students, many of them chanting “Don’t forget Atenco”, protested against Enrique Peña Nieto speaking as a presidential candidate on their campus. Peña Nieto was the governor of the state of Mexico in 2006 at the time of the 2006 violence and was widely reputed to have played a significant role in ordering the attacks<sup>33</sup>. He won the presidential elections and, at the time of submission of this dissertation, will become the new president of Mexico.

The student movement that protested his appearance on their college campus expanded significantly in the latter days of his candidacy, calling themselves #YoSoy132 [I am 132] (significance described below). After his election, the movement organized several large marches in Mexico City, and on July 14 and 15, 2012 held a “National Convention” in Atenco. The development of this new movement is significant for a number of reasons relevant to the arguments in this dissertation.

First, it shows that the Frente is still very relevant to contemporary politics in Mexico. A video released online by the #YoSoy132 committee shows Ignacio del Valle presenting students from #YoSoy132 with machetes. It was also a significant symbolic and organizational decision to carry out the National Convention in Atenco rather than in Mexico City (or Cuernavaca, where they also held organizational meetings).

Second, it shows the quickly evolving use of video as an organizational and ethical practice. The name of the movement, “I am 132,” is a reference to the fact that after their demonstration, the Peña Nieto campaign suggested that the opposing party had planted and paid

people to protest. One hundred and thirty one students then posted YouTube videos of themselves online saying that they were part of the protest, and showing their college IDs to prove that they were legitimately students of the school. “I am 132,” implies that “I am also against Peña Nieto and I am also not with the opposition party<sup>34</sup>”. YouTube has dramatically changed the temporality (in Warner’s (2001) sense) of video use in social movements, as well as the shape of the alternative economies of practice that videos mediate. However, YouTube seems to have added merely another layer of video use rather than replacing feature-length documentary films on DVD. There are still documentaries about the movement, and I was able to buy a dozen new DVDs from a sidewalk vendor on the outskirts of their *plantón* in Mexico City immediately after the elections. Some of these DVDs were compilations of YouTube videos. I have argued previously (Hinegardner 2009) that even in 2006 (when YouTube existed, but was not widely used in Mexico) there was an immediate period in which small, poorly edited videos were released on DVDs to provide quicker information for social movements. YouTube seems to be replacing this level of organization, as well as widening the network of people who have access to these preliminary and disarticulated videos. Even so, Salvador Díaz, Greg Berger, and the Frente’s Communication Commission are also all uploading their videos to YouTube, including older films made before YouTube was available. Canalseisdejulio has yet to move in that direction and seems unlikely to do so as it still depends on DVD sales for its livelihood.

Third, the National Convention has deep implications for the future of how *compañerismo*, dramatic confrontations, non-capitalist economies, and autonomy practices will play out in national and international politics. The Convention (sometimes identified as a Constitutional Convention) sees itself as rejecting the “imposition” of Peña Nieto as president and not recognizing his government as legitimate<sup>35</sup>. Far from ignoring the “illegal” federal

government in a completely autonomous process however, the plan outlines a robust schedule of marches, occupations, and highway blockages meant to protest the Peña Nieto government.

Mirroring the Frente's original tactics of making structural violence visible, the document names perpetrators of violence and injustice and avoids definition of who 'we' might be. Its aggressive plan of action indicates that many instances of dramatic confrontation will draw attention to structural violences in the year to come. One of the early actions was a "symbolic taking" [*toma simbólico*] of the offices of the largest television conglomerate in Mexico (Televisa) on July 27 to draw attention to biased and vapid media.

The plan also reveals a deep commitment to internal, generative, autonomous practices in that it proposes a complex system of autonomous social movements (independent from the state, political parties, and from one another) who meet on a regular basis and form almost a parallel government based on horizontal associations that operate on local, state, and national levels. The plan of struggle addresses areas that include "democratization and transformation of the media," "change in the educational, scientific, and technological model," "change in the neoliberal economic model," and "political transformation and connections with social movements." Description of these areas reveal a concern for internal, generative processes to innovate new social and political structures that would pressure existing state apparatuses while simultaneously generating their own solutions. Furthermore, these areas reveal a deep concern for more than simple democratic process. They hold the state accountable for its role in creating educational models, for instance, but see the solution to these problems as working directly with educational apparatuses to change educational values, rather than acting exclusively on government so that educational values might be changed as a result of Mexico becoming more democratic.

The master vision for how this new association of social movements will work is uncertain on both pragmatic and utopian levels. The diversity of movements coming together suggests that one of the central struggles of the movement will most likely lie in innovating and developing this unified vision. Even though this vision is uncertain, the social conditions and practices through which it will be developed have been agreed upon. It bases its generative political process on a horizontal, nonhierarchical structure that follows the ethics of *compañerismo*, with disciplinary mechanisms built-in to prevent individuals from gaining too much power. The ethics of nonviolent confrontation, communitarian selflessness, and disregard for profit and political parties are all apparent in the plan and suggest a generative political process that is practice-based and allows for working through the variety of ideological and structural difficulties they are likely to encounter. This practice-based approach, much like I have argued about making a film, is likely to have social, cultural, and political consequences even if the ‘final product’ is never finished.

The week before the National Convention, I was in Atenco and bumped into the man that I call Humberto. I lamented not being able to stay for the Convention and asked him how he thought it would go. “When do we stop fighting?” he asked, with a sudden sharp severity that startled me, and made me suddenly afraid of getting the wrong answer. “Never, *güera*,” he smiled, “Never.”

There will be no finished product of the National Convention, or the Mexican state, for that matter. The National Convention will incorporate practices developed and lessons learned from people’s experiences with the Zapatista movement, the Frente, the World Social Forum, La Otra Campaña, and the #Occupy movement. It will also draw from student activists’ experiences working on a film that never got made in a now defunct media collective, doing a community

radio show on a pirate radio station that possibly no one listened to, and running a t-shirt silk screen workshop for elementary school children, among other mediated social processes. These experiences and practices, among countless others, have already been incorporated into how #YoSoy132 is innovating and cultivating its own social and political processes. These experiences might be incorporated consciously and purposefully, but they are also brought to bear in a less definable way: through the ethical dispositions of the individuals and collectivities that are creating the movement. These ethical dispositions, as I have argued here, have been considerably mediated by experiences of producing and distributing media. Lessons learned, and dispositions cultivated in #YoSoy132 will, in turn, be incorporated into some newer political process that has yet to be imagined, but which will be a direct descendent of #YoSoy132.

The processes of social and political transformation described here are significant to anthropology not because these movements will make concrete, instrumental legal change in the Mexican political system, but rather because it is the process through which much less visible—but much more profound—transformations of social, political, and cultural structures occur that deeply impact that peoples' lives around the world, not just in Mexico. Many consequences of social movements evade quantification and instrumental causalities because profound change is a complex collective process that takes a long time. This is especially true for a movement that seeks to dismantle all hierarchies. The world has yet to see a sudden dramatic government takeover that avoided all relationships of domination. This kind of movement has little choice but to operate through collective processes that produce culture—that elusive object of anthropology that itself evades definition, instrumentality, and causality.

## END NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> A pseudonym

<sup>2</sup> A fascinating parallel genealogy could be constructed that traces social documentary in Mexico from ‘above’ through commercial and art house documentary film and ‘below’ from community and activist media. The Atenco films presented in this dissertation represent the meeting place of these two filmmaking traditions. Unfortunately, this genealogy is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

<sup>3</sup> I discuss this concept in reference to literature concerned with interdependent, relational, or diffuse ‘selves’ in Chapter 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Norteamericana* is the polite way to refer to women from the United States of America and Canada. I realize that under some estimations, Mexico also belongs to the continent of North America, but this is not an idea that I have found has much salience in Mexico.

<sup>5</sup> Virgilio is a pseudonym

<sup>6</sup> Humberto told me that the government could sell the same land for \$4,000 USD per square meter, but it’s not clear where this number came from.

<sup>7</sup> On the television program *Círculo Rojo*.

<sup>8</sup> These various scales can also be seen in light of assemblage theory. See Deleuze (2005 [1968]), de Landa (2006), and Escobar (2008).

<sup>9</sup> Many of these can be found on his YouTube Channel:

<http://www.youtube.com/user/saldeubas/videos> (accessed 08/11/12)

<sup>10</sup> Luis however, was beaten and taken into custody for several weeks during the repression Beto discussed above. Odette also had a warrant out for her arrest, but went in subsequent days to the court house to take care of the warrant. She was in prison for a matter of hours before she was released.

<sup>11</sup> The fact however, that spokespeople of the Frente had to repeatedly stress that the machete was a farm implement and nothing more is in itself evidence that there was some difficulty in seeing it that way.

<sup>12</sup> This is the same incident that Odette describes earlier, in which she was in a wagon attempting to break down the door of the National Palace.

<sup>13</sup> The unsubstantiated rumors held that WalMart wanted to buy the land to have its store in the middle of town. I cannot verify these rumors, but the WalMart scandal of 2012 indicates that at this time in 2006 WalMart was spending millions of dollars on bribes to local officials to obviate local processes for purchasing and developing land (Barstow 2012).

<sup>14</sup> I do not see this dream as protagonistic. Giving one’s life for the collectivity might make one famous, but it is also the ultimate negation – death – for the sake of the collectivity. Alexis Benhumea, for example, did become posthumously famous for being murdered on May 4<sup>th</sup>, 2006. I think the same can be said for detention. I think that giving one’s freedom (not being in jail) is a large personal sacrifice that overwhelms the degree to which one becomes famous for it.

<sup>15</sup> In 2009, the Supreme Court ruled that there were human rights abuses committed in Atenco on May 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

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<sup>16</sup> Some individuals who made films about the airport struggle donated recently recorded images to some of these films. These individuals did not play a production role or make editorial decisions on the films.

<sup>17</sup> Part of the emphasis on victimization in a human rights framework has to do with the knowable, provable, undeniable facts. For instance, it is undeniable that Beto was pulled from his house and beaten. (Note the passive voice). It is uncertain that Enrique Peña Nieto ordered the attacks. This statement is active, but improvable. It also takes a firm political stance *against* a party that many human rights organizations are reluctant to do hastily.

<sup>18</sup> The writer Carlos Monemayor wrote an opinion article in La Jornada to this effect on February 19, 2009

<sup>19</sup> All four of these names are pseudonyms.

<sup>20</sup> In fact, the commission borrowed a few machetes from the House to bring to political events they attended.

<sup>21</sup> This is a film that is frequently sold at political demonstrations and is probably edited by an enterprise specializing in pirating videos. It is a compilation that begins with long pieces of Klan Destino's *La Rebelión de los Fulgores* and ends with the entirety of Klamvé's *Atenco, un crimen de estado*. Because it is a compilation, I do not consider it a unique feature documentary.

<sup>22</sup> Each of the members of the commission individually left the screening room for small breaks at various points throughout this particular screening. Carlos told me that it was difficult for him to watch these scenes, and I suspect that a similar motivation could have prompted the others to leave the room as well.

<sup>23</sup> In 2009 these vendors included a newspaper stand, a hamburger/hotdog stand, an elote (corn on the cobb) stand, and a few men who sold large balloons for children to play with in the square.

<sup>24</sup> A Mexican anarchist from the early twentieth century.

<sup>25</sup> The decrease in value may be due to increased use of YouTube as a format for distribution. With increased internet access, more people can see videos on YouTube, and don't need to buy them. As YouTube and FaceBook come to distribute documentary, the videos also get very short. People are less likely to pay for a DVD of a dozen five-minute videos as they are to pay for a professionally produced feature-length documentary.

<sup>26</sup> It is the incredible demand for illegal drugs in the United States, for instance, that has created such a robust economy of drug traffickers and drug-related violence in Mexico. US based companies are responsible for unsafe working conditions across the globe, and Canadian mining companies are responsible for massive environmental and health disasters throughout Latin America.

<sup>27</sup> That the movement uses his films as a "calling card" are the words of Salvador Díaz Sanchez, director of Kan Destino Productions

<sup>28</sup> The Frente's relationship with Zapatismo goes back further than 2005. At least one central figure of the Frente joined with the Zapatistas for a time shortly after their 1994 revolt. There was, of course, no FPDT in 1994.

<sup>29</sup> *Romper el Cerco* is the most common documentary that street vendors sell about Atenco. Several vendors told me it is the most popular and recommended it to me as the "best". It is also revealing that the 'official' version canalseisdejulio sells contains subtitle tracks in five languages.

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<sup>30</sup> Canalseisdejulio refers to itself using different versions of its name that have varied throughout time and in various versions of its logo (Canal 6 de Julio, canal6dejulio, Canal Seis de Julio, for example). Since before 2006, the company most consistently referred to itself as canalseisdejulio in written documents (without the first letter capitalized) and so that is how I refer to it here. I've chosen to capitalize the first letter when beginning a sentence with the proper name for grammatical consistency.

<sup>31</sup> Palma was deported and did lose her seat in the CCC. Palma and Viveros did not meet for the first time in Cancun, but while doing a film together for a university class.

<sup>32</sup> One of the strongest tenets of La Otra Campaña was the denial of political parties as a useful political strategy. The campaign was controversial, in part, because it asked people who may have sympathized with both the Zapatistas and the PRD to choose sides.

<sup>33</sup> As I point out previously however, the Supreme Court exonerated him of responsibility in a human rights case in 2009)

<sup>34</sup> Note, in light of my discussion of *compañerismo* and making structural violence visible, that the name of the movement evades an 'identity' to create a contingent relationship both to a collectivity of others (the other 131) and to named perpetrators (Peña Nieto and the PRD). The perpetrators are made much more visible in their name than the identity of the protestors.

<sup>35</sup> The Convention publically released its plan of action and it can be found on the Frente's blog: <http://atencofpdt.blogspot.com/>



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