Gender Adjustments in Forgotten Places: The North-South Encuentros in Mexico

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In the twenty-first century, feminism as a political discourse that intervenes in capitalist social relations is being led from small groups in the global south where women are taking leadership positions and both men and women are recasting the gender culture of daily life. In *comunidades de base*, or grassroots communities across Latin America, new political subjects are emerging out of struggles that vary in their short-term goals but share an anti-capitalist stance and a long-term vision of alternative possibilities.[1] Woven into these efforts to build sustainable alternatives for supporting life are adjustments to gender norms. They are a site of political struggle, a measure of the accomplishments of autonomous community organizing, and a component of the cross-regional network-building that is reconstituting the fundamental basis of the modern nation.

If socialist feminism as the name for a standpoint that supports these goals has slipped out of political discourse, the specter of socialism and what might be called a feminism committed to it are nonetheless stirring in the grassroots in Latin America.[2] As the revolutionary strategies and discourses that fueled social movement toward socialist alternatives in the mid-twentieth century have changed, so have the struggles that target gender as a crucial component of social life. During the late twentieth century, women in Latin America continued to make waves in a variety of currents across private and public sectors, often in claims that fused prescribed feminine roles and feminist politics into a "*feminismo popular*," or popular feminism (Speed *et al.*).[3] In the 1980s, new social movements were emerging that seemed to offer women options outside traditional party structures (Franco; Lamas). At the same time, across the region the concept of the gender perspective absorbed a more pragmatic and professionalized feminism into state and civil society institutions (Castro; Serret). When "democracy" replaced "revolution" as the central term in the Latin American Left's political vocabulary (Alvarez, "Advocating"), many feminists played by the rules of new liberal states by seeking parity in the bodies of representational politics and enacting legal reforms (Mendoza 941). By the 1990s a new gender technocracy was being organized along two axes: a state regulating body and the women's NGOs that worked with it, too often, critics claimed, with little or no input from women's interests and needs at the grassroots level (Alvarez, "Advocating"; Castro; Monasterios; Petras). Once feminist organizations became major mediators in new state formations, the question of autonomy for feminism began to pivot on a new axis (Alvarez, "Encountering" 548). Debates were no longer about feminism's relation to a male-dominated socialist Left but rather its relation to national and international political institutions.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the emergence of socialist-leaning state formations and the organizing taking place at the local level in towns and villages in Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Paraguay are providing political openings that suggest a different direction both from the gender perspective absorbed into state bureaucracies and the "new social movements" of the late twentieth century that took group recognition and a multicultural state as their rallying points. Indigenous movements have led the way in these developments. In the new period of indigenous nationalism, independent indigenous women's movements are forming alliances with urban popular struggles where women are often in leadership positions. They are contesting the neoliberal state's abandonment of the social majority, reframing who gets to represent women's interests, and developing alternative forms of community and civic life. In these efforts, gender norms are sites of political education, and adjustments to them are part of the changing fabric of everyday politics. A historically significant example of the critical knowledge and practice that comprise this movement from below and the ways gender adjustments have featured in it is a series of North-South Encounters that have been taking place in Mexico.

Unwashed by the rising pink tide of socialist-leaning elected governments in South America, Mexico's governing political party is center-right, governance is increasingly militarized, and the country's political economy is defined through foreign investment, proximity to U.S. consumer markets, remittances from emigrants, and the drug business. Nonetheless, progressive social movement is simmering there, the most well-known example being the Zapatistas in Chiapas. During the last decades of the twentieth century in Mexico, widespread debate about the meaning of democracy and women's organizing around rights, coalition building among women's organizations, and the spread of women's NGOs were all part of the progressive political conjuncture that framed the emergence of the Zapatista movement. Many other urban and rural movements also have confronted the neoliberal state's neglect and impunity and have done so through women's leadership. Among them are the Popular Assembly of the People of Oaxaca (APPO) and the mobilizing around the murdered women in Juarez. Carved out of a fight for basic survival needs and a political education that builds on the lived awareness of the violence of capitalism, the North-South Encuentros are a less examined example of grassroots organizing. Significantly, the *encuentros*, or encounters, are building a political network across communities of Mexico's forgotten peoples in the north and south. In the process, they are painstakingly and persistently fostering critical knowledge and developing local alternative practices for reproducing and sustaining life.[4] Although they would not call themselves either socialist or feminist, the women and men in these small communities in Mexico are a creative political force, challenging the neoliberal model, enacting new forms of leadership and gender identification, and forging democratic practices that are advancing and reinventing traditional values within and across regions. Since 2004, workers from the northern border have held a series of exchanges with the Zapatista autonomous communities of Chiapas.[5] Supported by the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras' (CJM) "Standing on Two Feet" Program and in coordination with the Zapatista's national campaigns, this series of encounters is promoting a version of political autonomy that draws on rural and urban, indigenous and working-class women's leadership. A strong thread in the fabric of alliances that have emerged from this cross-regional organizing has been what we might call a process of "gender adjustment."

I use the term "gender adjustment" to refer to small changes that are enacted in specific, local gendered situations. These adjustments are practices that transgress or revise gender norms in the particular everyday situations in which men and women live. The changes they enact or provoke are uneven. They are not won through campaigns focused on gender issues or for women's rights. Rather they are accomplished as members of a community cooperate to meet basic needs and strive for lives with dignity. These gender adjustments take place in a specific situation, and while they may have an impact on the broader social conditions in which people live—that is, the social apparatus that reproduces the gender norms of the larger society—probably they do not.[6] Mobilizing to end the violence enabled by the hierarchical organization of gender culture—for example, in campaigns for reproductive health or against rape and domestic abuse—is of course a necessary and long-term process given the widespread violations of women's well-being, and inroads on these and other issues by Mexican feminists have had important impacts on many lives.[7] But the less visible spaces where women step up to be active community leaders or men do the work of care are also significant arenas where gender adjustments are shaping the ways change is happening in Mexico, and feminism's future lives here too.

Before addressing the history of the North-South Encuentros and their impact on organizing, especially in the north, I want to sketch out the broader historical and political significance of these meetings. First of all, the north and south of Mexico have historically been seen and treated as provincial areas, far from the center of power in Mexico City, both in a geographic and a political sense. While the peoples of Tamaulipas and Chiapas are diverse and culturally distinct, each region in different ways has been stereotyped in mainstream Mexican culture as marginal, backward, or unsophisticated. The Zapatista uprising in 1994 disrupted the myth of national belonging that rested on an excluded and romanticized Indian population.[8] It inserted a new version of indigenous people's lives and voices into the Mexican national imaginary and provoked widespread debate on issues of national belonging, political representation, and democratic governance. The 1994 uprising drew the attention of all Mexicans to Chiapas, and in the ensuing years the indigenous struggle there has had popular support among workers and the poor in northern border states, even if the realities of life in the Lacondona jungle are remote from their daily concerns. Across the ideological and geographic distance separating these regions, the North-South Encuentros are building a bridge of political education and alliances between groups who despite their different cultures and histories share a social location as Mexico's forgotten ones.

In addition, the encounters have brought together two important new axes of social movement: an innovative approach to labor organizing developed in the north that is linking the workplace and the community, and a new model of autonomy articulated in the Zapatista's call for reconstituting the nation. Significantly, both formulate their political goals in anticapitalist terms. During the exchanges that have taken place in both northern and southern locations, knowledge of neoliberal capitalism as it is lived in the flesh is shared, critical perspectives are amplified, and new political subjects are being formed. Through the encounters, the Zapatista communities come to know about the realities of factory work and the conditions of life on the northern border. This history is especially valuable to them because increasing numbers of people in the state of Chiapas are migrating to northern border cities due to the restructuring of the agricultural economy in the south.[9] Many migrants look for jobs in the maquiladoras, but few have experience with factory work.[10] Workers in the north offer the indigenous communities specific examples from their history of labor organizing, the strategies they have developed for using the law and for building strength among workers. The legacy of women's strong leadership in the factories of the north is a particular point of interest for groups in the south. The Zapatista communities bring to workers in the north a decades-long history of community-building and autonomous participatory governance. They offer knowledge about how to implement shared decision-making and make use of local conditions and resources to develop sustainable economic, health, and education projects.

In sum, the North-South Encounters are part of a process of "changing the way to change" (Esteva and Pérez 14), not through political parties or vanguard leaders but rather "from below and for below" (EZLN). Working across regional and ethnic divisions, and emerging from the grassroots, the encounters are developing an explicitly anti-capitalist stance that is local and autonomous while forging strategies that extend critical citizenship through national and international networks. As men and women from these forgotten urban and rural spaces in the north and south talk and listen and learn from each other, they are marshalling biopower from within bare life, and in that process they are also making gender adjustments.

Finally, by way of an introduction and acknowledgement, I want to thank the residents of the colonia Blanca Navidad in Tamaulipas and the Zapatista communities of Chiapas who shared their history with me. In the multiple visits I have made to Blanca Navidad, colonia residents have generously received me and allowed me to interview them, to learn their stories through informal conversations, and to join the audiences gathered for their public presentations. I attended one of the North-South Encuentros in Nuevo Laredo and listened to the residents' reports on the others. My visit to four autonomous communities in Chiapas included conversations with many community members there about their new formation of self-government. Above all, my ten years of work with Martha Ojeda and maquiladora worker groups who are members of CJM has been an invaluable source of knowledge and inspiration for this essay and for my life.

Some History of Standing on Two Feet

The shared history of maquiladora workers in the north and indigenous peoples in the southern state of Chiapas hinges on events in 1994 when the passage of NAFTA on January 1st coincided with the uprising of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN). NAFTA opened the free trade door for multinational corporations to invest in all of Mexico. After NAFTA, the maquiladoras that had been confined to the northern border could extend to the entire country where they would continue to thrive on tax breaks and an abundance of cheap labor. In the years following NAFTA's passage, the number of maquilas in Mexico increased, peaking at 3,000 in 2000. The number of factories has dropped since then, but they still employ thousands of men and women.[11] The maquilas routinely ignore health and safety regulations, sanction blatant violations of labor and human rights, and contaminate the air, land, and water of the communities surrounding them. The current economic crisis has increased the number of lay-offs in the maquiladora sector, and job security has eroded as contracts are increasingly part-time and with no benefits. Independent union organizing in the factories has long been repressed, and workers who organize for better working conditions or unions of their own choosing are invariably fired. Those who try to stand up for their rights often face intimidation, harassment, and physical violence from supervisors and corrupt union representatives. Most maquiladora workers earn on average the equivalent of $45 to $50 U.S. per week, and they frequently are forced to meet high productivity quotas with long hours and illegal mandatory overtime. In the early years of the program and into the boom years of the 1980s, in some industries 95% of the workers were women. Now the average proportion of women to men has changed to roughly 60-40, but an unskilled, fast-turnover labor remains feminized, and many women workers still routinely suffer humiliation, sexual harassment, and discrimination (Ojeda and Hennessy).

While NAFTA has had a horrific impact on the majority of Mexican workers, it also gave birth to intense organized resistance in the factories on the border. In April 1994, only a few months after NAFTA was initiated and the Zapatista uprising occurred, 2,000 Sony workers in Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, the majority of them women, staged a wildcat strike over the right to have an independent union (Ojeda and Hennessy 46-59). Within a few years, all along the border more strikes followed. Many of them were in Tamaulipas, and in each instance women were in the lead. After 2000, rising unemployment and the struggle to survive made economic alternatives a pressing concern for many maquiladora workers, and organizing strategies that focused solely on the workplace were proving ineffective. During campaigns for independent unions, workers involved in organizing would be fired and blacklisted. In the face of the need to provide for their families, and inspired to continue organizing and educating, small groups of former workers in several communities developed fledgling cooperative projects. However, they were challenged by the process and often failed in their efforts to develop the collective consciousness and secure the material conditions that would sustain them.

Out of the recognition that in order to survive grassroots organizations need to maintain the "two feet" of political education and sustainable resources, in 2004 CJM developed its Standing on Two Feet Program. Founded in 1989 during the NAFTA debates, CJM is a multi-sectoral, international coalition that supports Mexican factory workers.[12] The aim of the CJM Standing on Two Feet Program is to strengthen the "two feet" of political education and sustainable community resources in local factory-to-community organizing efforts. The North-South Encuentros do this work by bringing together campesino and indigenous community members from the south of Mexico with maquiladora workers from the north. These encounters strengthen organizing efforts in both regions in terms that are specific to the needs and conditions of each locale while at the same time advancing a collective political standpoint that is extra-local.

As a first step, in November 2004 representatives from the Zapatista communities in Chiapas met with maquila workers in several cities along the border where they learned about the negative impact of NAFTA here. The following year, a delegation of five women workers from northern maquiladora towns traveled to several Zapatista communities in Chiapas to share the experiences of women workers in the factories and to learn about the political, economic, and social alternatives being developed in Chiapas. The third encuentro took place in 2006. During the first half of that year, as Mexico's most recent presidential election approached, a Zapatista caravan journeyed across the length of the country in what they called the Other Campaign. The direction of the Other Campaign had been determined by a series of meetings in August and September 2005 in villages in the canyons leading to the Lacandona jungle. Here the Zapatista high command and the EZLN's diverse constituencies listened and talked about their needs and the possibility of devising alternatives during this time of political openings in the Mexican state (Ross). In an effort to consolidate a non-electoral, anticapitalist Left, the Other Campaign called for the enactment of a new national Constitution that would bar privatization of public resources and end other neoliberal violations (Ross). The Campaign was backed by the EZLN's new statement of objectives entitled "The Sixth Declaration of the Selva Lacondona." The Declaration announces the Zapatista's intention to build another way of doing politics by forming alliances beyond Chiapas in order to develop a national program that would transform capitalist property relations and lead to a new Constitution (Mora; Gledhill; Zugman).

Sixteen comandantes and Sub-comandante Marcos (whose alias for the event was Delegado Zero) led the six-month caravan, and one of their stops was the colonia Blanca Navidad on the outskirts of Nuevo Laredo. In the exchange that took place, indigenous people and maquila workers acknowledged that they are fighting the same struggle against exploitation and poverty. They committed to support each other, and they called their agreement *los joditos apoyando los jodidos*—"the ones who are screwed supporting each other." On December 22, in fulfillment of their promise, the indigenous people from Chiapas sent 1,000 boxes of coffee, corn, and beans to Blanca Navidad. The trailer truck arrived just in time for Christmas.

Three other *encuentros* followed this one. In May 2007, as part of the Other Campaign's strategic links to key communities in the north, the EZLN sent three comandantes—Myriam, Eucaria, and Zabadeo, two women and a man—to Blanca Navidad for a longer stay. They discussed the challenges of gender discrimination and labor exploitation that women face in southern Mexico, and they explained the cooperative projects women are running there. They helped the colonia residents take over a nearby water source and install faucets on several streets. Their visit inspired the residents to build a small clinic, launch a collective process for dealing with their land disputes, and develop proposals for a few economic initiatives, including a tortilla-making facility. Significantly, in this exchange women's energy and labor propelled much of the planning and discussion.

In July 2008, twelve people from Blanca Navidad traveled to Chiapas to learn traditional medicine and meet with Zapatista communities. They had discussions with members of the highland communities of Oventic, Morelia, and Roberto Barrios and learned about their "Boards of Good Government," how they preserve their traditions, run their own cooperatives, clinics, and schools, and conduct community education. Once the group returned to Blanca Navidad, the women shared the recipes they had gathered for curing ailments and for making everyday use items like shampoo and soap. Men and women began community gardens of fruit trees, vegetables, and medicinal herbs that could thrive in the arid soil of the north. Don Marcelino and his wife started a community chicken farm and began building ecological stoves. Kata built a wind generator. They gave community talks to share what they learned, and these offered women the opportunity to demonstrate their leadership.

In January 2009, a small delegation of residents from Blanca Navidad journeyed by bus to Mexico City and San Cristobal, Chiapas to participate in the First World Festival of Dignified Rage where they presented their history to an international gathering. They met other organizations from Juarez, Atenco, Oaxaca, Argentina and Chile, and they returned home articulating their social location in expanded terms. As Blanca Estela Enriquez put it in reporting back to the colonia, "We are in the four wheels of capitalism: exploited, evicted, repressed, and scorned."

Blanca Navidad

Like the Zapatistas' autonomous communities, the colonia Blanca Navidad does not exist on the state's official map, even though it is located at the crossroads of international trade. You can find this stretch of unincorporated land just outside the city limits of Nuevo Laredo, on the road that passes under the International Free Trade Bridge where the narcos have made their shrines to Saint Death. Some residents work in the assembly plants or used to; most survive through the informal economy. Many suffer health problems from poor working conditions or chronic diseases provoked by poverty and the toxins dumped in the colonia. Until 2007 there was no water, and there is still no electricity, sewage system, or paved roads. Since invading the land in 2004, residents have petitioned the municipal government to provide these utilities, a reasonable request from people who work and pay taxes in the city. But after enduring several years of the government's violence and neglect, they have now decided to channel their energies into sustaining themselves.

Nuevo Laredo is Mexico's largest inland port, with 70 percent of all trade between Mexico and the U.S. crossing the border here, fed by the assembly work of the maquilas and funneled onto interstate highway 35 which runs all the way to the Canadian border. The initial residents of Blanca Navidad were among the many migrants dislocated from farming towns to the south, drawn to the city of Nuevo Laredo by the prospect of work in the factories. But arriving migrants who flocked to the assembly plants quickly discovered that their low wages were not enough to pay for food and rent. Blanca Enriquez was one of them. One of the founders of the colonia, she came to Nuevo Laredo from Veracruz, and looked for a job in the factories. Now she is working in the Sony plant. As Blanca recounts the story, in late December 2004 a group of about 50 families, brought together because they all were unable to pay rent from their meager factory wages, decided to invade this land. They cut the trees and prickly pears and built small lean-tos of cloth and wood for shelter. The first night they were there a small miracle occurred—it snowed—an extraordinary event on the border as it had not snowed in Nuevo Laredo for 100 years. Embracing this sign of the heavens' approval, they called the new settlement Blanca Navidad.

Soon after the first group's arrival, a woman named Hermes appeared, claiming that the land was hers, and she managed to procure payments from each of the families. When the settlement came to the attention of Pepe Suarez, the mayor of Nuevo Laredo at the time, he negotiated with Hermes for a parcel of the land, but the deal went sour. As a result, she was arrested, and the mayor evicted the settlers. Undaunted and lacking sufficient resources to support themselves, the families soon returned. This time they carved out lots and roads, established a land register, and built stronger houses, some of cardboard, others of wood. In February 2005, a year after the founding group and their families reinvaded the land, the new PRI mayor, Daniel Peña, sent in bulldozers and torched the houses. Community resistance was immediate, and women were in the lead.

According to Blanca, the morning of the eviction the city sent in water delivery trucks as a pretext for checking if the women were alone. And then, she reports,

> about three hours later the eviction began. But they didn't take into account how strong we were. We women began to climb on the machines and remove the keys. We grabbed rocks and sticks and we ran. When they saw that we weren't driven away, they returned at night when everything was dark and burned the houses that were still standing. We used the little water we had left from what they had delivered that morning to pour on our burning houses. Another morning they came again. This time we were stronger. We made fences and ditches and we blocked the streets with the wood they had knocked out of our houses so that the machines couldn't pass. Women guarded the entrance so that the men could check the streets.

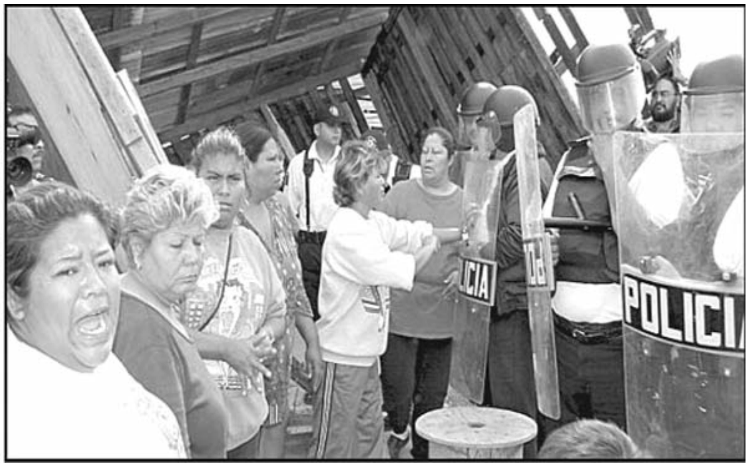

Figure 1
Women of Blanca Navidad defending their homes uring the eviction.
Photo by Juan Carlos Perez y Javier Santos, El Manana.

Javier Mendez, Blanca's husband, and another founding member of the colonia, agrees that "the women made us strong. They gave us the courage to keep fighting." Jose (Poncho) Herrera concurs. "The women helped more than we men did," he says, but it was through everyone's persistence "together all as partners that we won enough of a victory to be able to stay." And now over 800 families live there.

The land that comprises Blanca Navidad is part of a large tract, the *ejido* Pancho Villa, whose custodian, Don Margarito, fought in the Mexican Revolution and then used this land to raise corn. *Ejidos* are common lands established in Article 27 of Mexico's post-revolution Constitution, the legacy of Emiliano Zapata's struggle for agrarian rights. Article 27 stipulated that ultimate title for farmlands remained with the state, with officially recognized peasant beneficiaries receiving hereditable rights of individual or collective use

(Gledhill 488). In other words, *ejido* lands could be passed on but not sold or rented. The *ejiditarios* who lived on the land and farmed it did not own it. In 1992, as a condition for signing NAFTA, President Carlos Salinas de Gortari led the revision of Article 27 to allow the privatization of the *ejidos*. This change meant that in order to legitimize ownership of land, families like Don Margarito's who were custodians of *ejidos* had to apply to the Secretary of Agriculture for a title that would certify ownership. In the late 1990s, as part of the terms imposed on Mexico by NAFTA and the World Bank, federal subsidies to Mexican farmers through the National Company of Popular subsistence (CONASUPO) were eliminated. Not only did farmers suffer from the lost support, but many *ejiditarios* who had outstanding loans were required to repay them as a condition for receiving land ownership. Consequently, after the reform of Article 27, some farmers never sought land title for fear of being pursued for outstanding seed or equipment loans. Part of the legalizing ownership process also entails transfer of the lands from the National Agrarian Land Registry to the Public Registry of Properties in order for a transferable property title to be granted. But Don Margarito never applied for land title from the Secretary of Agriculture. This technicality provided the opening for the settlers' invasion. Various other claims to ownership surfaced after Don Margarito died, and they all remain unresolved. However, according to civil law, if the squatters occupy the land in a peaceful and public way for ten years, it could become theirs. In the meantime, from its outlaw existence, the colonia Blanca Navidad is still standing and articulating a northern border community's version of political autonomy.

Autonomy as a Political Stance

After their representatives visited Chiapas in 2008, Blanca Navidad residents decided to become an autonomous community. The decision to embrace autonomy was influenced by the examples of autonomous governance they witnessed in the south as well as a series of frustrated appeals to their local government. Not only had Blanca Navidad residents been twice evicted by two different mayors, they also had been courted by several rounds of municipal political candidates who visited the colonia in election season bearing gifts and empty promises of government support (for electricity, water lines, roads, healthcare, a school) in exchange for votes. The colonia's decision to renounce this "bad government" was also shaped by an evolving sense of its social and political location in relation to national and international forces and possibilities. On their way to Chiapas, the group of Blanca Navidad residents saw many examples of land and water being harnessed by foreign investors for the energy needs of U.S. consumers while indigenous people, like the residents of Blanca Navidad, live without electricity. Reflecting on what he saw, Don Marcelino, one of the older Blanca Navidad residents who was in that delegation, says, "Here we are without light, illuminating ourselves with a candle. That's not fair. Why? Because four or five are millionaires and here we are screwed and with nothing. We have to open our eyes and learn what others have learned. And that's what we are doing right here in Nuevo Laredo."

The self-determination that the colonia residents now espouse echoes the concept of autonomy that the Zapatistas have been promoting in the past 15 years as well as a long tradition among Mexican popular movements. Joined in the 1980s with the expression "civil society," the Zapatista concept of autonomy rearticulates the popular social movement mobilized in the aftermath of the earthquake in Mexico City in 1985 that reoriented social change away from political parties or a revolutionary vanguard. As Gustavo Esteva and Carlos Pérez point out, even as Mexican popular movements and organizations embraced autonomy as a political stance, competing concepts and practices have been in circulation and under debate. One version, the European autonomous tradition adopted by Nicaragua, situates autonomous communities within the existing nation-state, conceiving autonomy as part of a process of political decentralization. This version was rejected by the Zapatistas in the Accords on Indigenous Rights and Culture signed in 1996 during the peace negotiations in San Andrés Sachem'chen. The San Andrés Accords do not call for the state to manage indigenous communities but rather to recognize what the indigenous communities already have: territory and their own uses and customs with which to govern themselves. This version of autonomy is not separatist; rather it questions the formal social pact inherited from the Mexican Revolution and insists on the capacity of indigenous and other peoples to determine their identity, government, and ways of life (Esteva and Pérez 128-129; Barmeyer; Stephen "Redefined").[13]

In 2001, after the Mexican Congress failed to endorse the San Andrés Accords, the Zapatista movement declared its autonomy from the Mexican state and decided to carry out the Accords unilaterally. Since then, the Zapatista's thirty-eight autonomous municipalities have concentrated on putting in place self-sufficient economic projects and "good government" guided by the mandate to "lead by obeying" through community decision-making and collective participation based on regular rotation of officeholders and equal treatment of political allies and opponents alike (Gledhill 494).

The Zapatista's autonomous governance operates through five centers that they call "*caracoles*." The Spanish word "caracol" carries multiple meanings. It means "snail" as well as conch shell, the trumpet shell that has been used for generations in Mayan villages to call the people together. The autonomous communities speak about their movement as analogous to the snail that lives close to the earth, moves slowly and deliberately, and inhabits a shell whose structure radiates outward. Like the snail, the autonomous communities live close to the earth, and they are making change slowly and deliberately in their localities while also broadcasting to others. Their Caracoles are centers for community gathering, governance, and dissemination.

While they publicize news and issue periodic declarations, the Zapatistas refuse to advance their idea and practice of autonomous governance as appropriate for everyone because they don't see their practice of autonomy as the only or the best way. Nonetheless, their emphasis on "governing by obeying" has been a model for local democratic governance elsewhere. During the Zapatista comandantes' 2007 visit to Blanca Navidad, the colonia adopted the figure of the *caracole*, calling themselves "The Caracol of the North." They painted this name and the figure of the snail into the murals on their community buildings depicting women workers and indigenous women together.

The Zapatista's new form of relating included women's concerns.

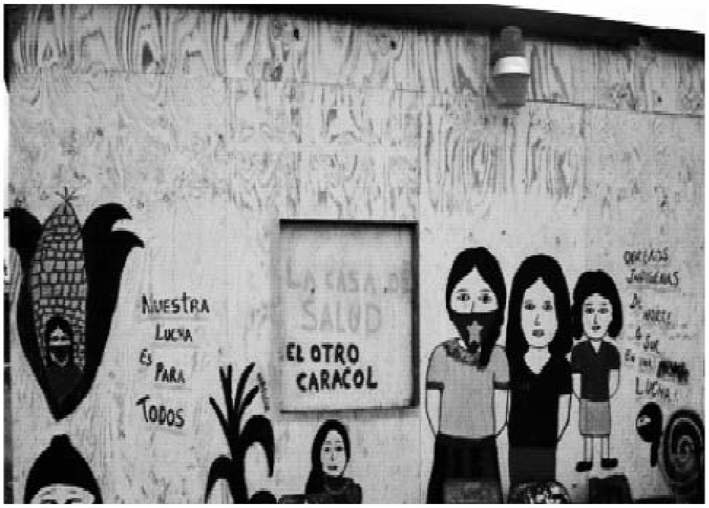

Figure 2
Mural on the clinic of Blanca Navidad. Photo by Rosemary Hennessy.

The Women's Revolutionary Law, adopted by the Zapatistas in 1994, calls for women's rights to healthcare, education, choice, and leadership; to freedom from beatings, mistreatment, and rape (Speed et al 3-32; Forbis 186). The Zapatistas are exceptional for their rhetorical promotion of women's value and rights and for situating women as key spokespersons. Their new governing process also aims to recruit more women participants. But change occurs slowly, and gender norms that devalue and oppress women persist in their communities. For Zapatista women, the concept of autonomy has been contested terrain. During the preparation of the Accords and in the National Indigenous Congresses held in Mexico City in 1996 and 1997, indigenous women broadened the Zapatista notion of autonomy and put forward several demands (Stephen, "Gender" 60-61). They held out an integrated vision of human being and called for women's full participation at home, in the community, and in the nation. They demanded equal division of domestic labor, land rights, and respect for their bodies and persons. In all of these ways women's call for autonomy pressured and eventually modified the formulation of autonomy that rested on respect for indigenous *usos y costumbres*, or traditional customs, incorporating the proviso that these customs should not be oppressive to women (Stephen, "Gender" 63). Various *comandantas* have advocated forcefully for changing customs and opening new paths to thinking about traditional ways that deprive women of their dignity, yet within the Zapatista's new system of governance women's full participation remains uneven and contested. Women are still seriously under-represented in the governing councils, and the communities are not always supportive of women's activities that defy expected roles (Eber; Forbis; Mora; Stahler-Sholk; Olivera). Research on the internal dynamics of the communities suggests that the Women's Revolutionary Law did not change longstanding customs (Forbis). In this context, the North-South Encuentros have been occasions to encounter different degrees of gender adjustment across communities that are slowly marshalling new relationships to the land and to each other.

Gender Adjustments and the Biopower of Standing on Two Feet

These new relationships and the gender adjustments that are part of them exemplify and promote a form of biopower that reorients that concept. The encounters enable us to understand biopower as a positive force, a notion that is quite distinct from the understanding of biopolitics being put forward and widely adopted in political theory now. One notable example is the work of the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. Agamben elaborates Michel Foucault's analysis of biopolitics as the form that power takes in modern societies when the king's sovereignty is replaced by the more diffuse circulation of power over life. Like Foucault, Agamben is interested in biopolitics or the increasing tendency for power to take control of life itself. Through an array of technologies and institutions, biopolitics penetrates subjects' bodies and all forms of life. Agamben is interested in the exclusions inscribed in the regulation of life, both in its juridical and normative technologies. His name for this concealed nucleus of biopolitics is "bare life." "Bare life" is that which is included in modern democratic politics as an exception—that is, an area of life that the law has abandoned but that is also the counterpart to its sovereign violence. He traces the genealogy of bare life across western history and claims that a major change occurred in modernity as sovereign power mutated into biopolitics. The result is that bare life came to be included in modern democracies as their hidden inner ground, a zone of exclusion that is embedded in the very structure of citizenship itself (Agamben 9).

While Agamben's analysis offers a fresh perspective on the operation of power in modern states, it misses several crucial points. First of all, he does not address the ways in which bare life in modernity is materially bound to the outlawed needs upon which capitalist production and accumulation depends and without which the regime of law cannot function. Secondly, in formulating bare life as the state of exception that is stripped of political significance and relegated to a zone outside civic life where political distinctions no longer matter, he ignores the ways these zones of exclusion are nonetheless structured by the cultural configurations of biopolitics—gender, race, and ethnicity, for example (Ziarek). And finally, he fails to acknowledge bare life as a site of struggle and resistance (Laclau 14).

The North-South Encuentros offer a more ample and politically efficacious counter-narrative that situates forgotten peoples as actors in and against the violent biopolitics specific to capitalism. Furthermore, they demonstrate that gender adjustments are a significant part of the exercise of a resistant biopower in social spaces where life has been deregulated and citizens abandoned. Here biopower pushes back against capitalism's deregulation of life and reorients cultural norms. In other words, these forgotten spaces may be the necessary exclusions of modernity's biopolitics, but in them people are mustering biopower out of bare life in the invention of alternative social relations.

In order to survive individually and as a species, humans must reproduce the means to meet the conditions of human life, a process that depends on human as well as natural resources. So far in history this fact is inescapable. It is generally agreed that humans need food, water, air, and a livable temperature or shelter to survive. To these minimal needs we can add the secondary needs of communication and the exercise of one's affective capacities—the cultural glue that makes human life social and individual lives sustainable. Child care, healthcare, and eldercare give people time to grow up, to be well, and to grow old with relative stability. But these are time-consuming costs and as such they are a drag on capital accumulation. Deregulation of the human body, of trade, labor, and the natural environment aims to lower these costs by removing the constraints that human and natural time impose on reproduction. The result is that the time needed for regeneration is being stretched to the limit (Brennan 17, 87).

As deregulation impinges more and more on the very conditions of survival, it becomes what Teresa Brennan has called "*bio-deregulation*" (Brennan 20, 32). Bio-deregulation diminishes the time that both humans and nature need to replenish, and it imposes new rules on daily life. Like economic deregulation, it privileges immediate profits over long-term sustainability (Brennan 33). The effects are forms of biopolitics visited upon bodies both in the advanced capitalist sectors of the global North and in the hyper exploited two-thirds world of the global South. They are manifest in constraints that affect how and where people live and work as they are made to labor longer and harder, as interaction and personal contact are restricted, and migration becomes a matter of course either by commuting longer distances or relocating from homelands in order to work for wages and survive. Bio-deregulation registers in lack of time and a life rhythm of rushing and insecurity. The body also deregulates when it ignores the regular rhythms necessary to the harmonious interplay of its cycles. The deregulated body is one that goes without enough sleep, rest, and proper food (Brennan 24).

Bio-deregulation crosses the degrees of separation between exploited and hyper-exploited workers, and for this reason it is a useful concept for enabling people in seemingly disparate situations to identify a certain common ground. Many in the one-third world who have ostensibly benefited from global capitalism suffer its negative impact on their lives and health as do those who labor to survive in the two-thirds world. But the hyper-deregulated are socially abandoned in ways that others are not. The difference is precisely what constitutes bare life—those severely outlawed needs that are the remainder of hyper-extracted surplus labor power and other depleted natural resources. Bare life accumulates from the abandonment and exhaustion of multiple life forms in order to support profit margins and the continued promotion of commodity production and consumption.

From its earliest historical phases, capital accumulation has depended on bare life, on a disposable labor force whose cheap price is maintained by the social skin that accompanies its exchange value. Slavery, the economic relation in which human lives are purchased outright, makes the slave socially "dead," a non-person in the law whose existence is excluded by the sovereign state but included within the social relations of capitalism. Hyper-exploited workers are in a similar situation of "liminal incorporation" into the social body (Ziarek 96). Their recognition as citizens is continually undercut by the degree and intensity of their unmet needs and the legal controls that guarantee continued minimal terms for their material existence. In this zone of abandonment, cultural difference modulates degrees of deregulation and unmet need and facilitates the repression or public forgetting of these losses.

At the intersection of capital's spatial expansion and its abandonment of the generational and daily reproduction-time needed for survival stand those whose personhood is devalued as feminine. Feminization is one tag for the negative personhood built into the liberal notion of citizenship and the symbolic scaffolding of modernity. Historically, it has served to thrust workers and indigenous peoples into bare life. Feminized bodies in the marketplace, home, or prison help guarantee a cheap and disposable source of value, and feminized indigeneity is an ideological pretext for extracting lands and natural resources. Profits accumulated through free market exchange capitalize on the political and cultural dispossession of certain subjects, a dispossession that registers in the body, and femininity is one form this dispossession takes (Hennessy 2006).[14]

In the colonias of Tamaulipas and the highlands of Chiapas where bare life is regulated by both the legal political economy and its shadow, death oozes into life. Since the mid-twentieth century, neoliberal economic policies have taken a deadly toll on Mexico as the invasion of foreign investment intensified the exploitation of human labor, contaminated and crippled bodies, poisoned the environment, and snatched up common farmlands (Ojeda and Hennessy). As a northern border state and one of the prime sites for multinational investment in export processing since 1965, Tamaulipas has paid dearly in human and environmental costs. Blanca Navidad is only one of many similar colonias where workers live on the fringes of industrial parks that spill chemical effluent directly into the river and into the land and air. When it rains, unpaved colonia roads are turned into lakes, and mud becomes the medium for all transit. In Blanca Navidad after a rainfall, water used to accumulate in a big ditch, and on hot days children would swim in this mudhole, but they no longer do since they began encountering too many dead bodies dumped there by the narcos.

Neoliberal political economy has taken a lethal toll in Chiapas too. During the last 15 years, the region's natural resources have been stripped by agribusiness and bio-piracy. The Mexican government's *Procede* program has divided communities by enticing farmers to buy imported low-cost genetically modified seeds that undermine generations of indigenous farming practices and destroy future crop yields. Women working in the fields risk being raped by paramilitary forces. And many women and children die from lack of medical attention. But if the forms of bio-deregulation in these forgotten places in Mexico's north and south have been brutal, driven by the corporate state's investments in biopolitics, nonetheless the people there are activating a biopower that nourishes life, and gender adjustments are evident in that process.

When they visited Blanca Navidad, Myriam and Eucaria spoke of the heavy price women have continued to pay in the years after the uprising as targets of military and paramilitary intimidation and sexual violence, and they also pointed to the challenge of women's continued subordination within the Zapatista communities. But gender adjustments also were evident in the very syntax of their descriptions when they referred to women with the word "nosotras," transgressing the standard masculine first person plural form of "we" by feminizing it. A small adjustment to be sure. But the encounters also provided opportunities to carry forward into more public arenas a foundation of gender adjustments that have been occurring in the colonia. Doña Bety remarked that "we identified with the indigenous women who visited as workers and homemakers." But in fact the women and men of Blanca Navidad have been developing a degree of autonomy from traditional hierarchically ordered gender schemes that value men over women. Although many of these adjustments are situational, nonetheless they range widely over everyday activities. They impact the sexual division of labor, the processes of decision-making and governance, and the provision of well-being in the community. Women in the core group of colonia founders have been the principle community spokespeople. They are full participants in the economic projects and integrated into the vigilance committee whose members guard the entrance gate and keep a registry of visitors. Furthermore, there are gender adjustments in domestic work among members of the core group. Some of the men in the group of colonia founders are actively involved in the labor of childrearing. Doña Bety, one of the founders and one of the colonia's many single mothers, built her house herself. As another mark of their gender adjustments, the community has accepted and welcomed as "just one more" two gay couples who were being harassed in their former residence.

Gender adjustments like these have been conditioned by the fact that many of the women in Blanca Navidad have been or still are wage earners in the maquilas. Earning wages outside the home puts them in a situation that to some degree adjusts the gender norm of women's economic dependence on husbands and fathers. The situation of the eviction also thrust women into the position of being the community's strength, and as they also were providing household incomes or heading families as single mothers, a more collective process of gender adjustment began to congeal. While the women and men of Blanca Navidad have not radically transformed traditional gender values, their adjustments to a hierarchically ordered cultural system of gender difference has accompanied the consolidation of the community's collective interests.

The women from the north assert that women have become leaders there because "we are more tenacious; when confronted with a lot to accomplish, we keep going," and many reiterate that they also are inspired by the Zapatistas' accomplishments, saying, "If they can do it, we can too." The "doing" is not only aimed against the bio-political forces that circumscribe their existence; it is inventing a biopower that strives for freedom. This biopower emerges from bare life, and it is forming new political subjects. These subjects are not only taking a defiant stance in relation to the structures of capital and the state, they are creating their own new laws and devising alternative measures to meet common needs. This standpoint recognizes gender hierarchies as regulatory and exclusionary. And here, through lived practice rather than analysis, a feminism without the name plots the future.

In describing Blanca Navidad's current situation, Poncho Herrera, another of the colonia's founders, says he often remembers the words Comandante Zebedeo spoke during his visit, and he adds,

> we are continuing to form alliances not only in our own country but also around the world, looking for an other way of life so that future generations may have the chance to choose what works for them. We have a lot to learn as we know practically nothing. But we are still standing (*estamos en pie*).

In this phrase—*estamos en pie*/we are still standing—can be heard echoes of the CJM program "standing on two feet" as well as the concept of autonomy that the Zapatistas have developed in their decades-long struggle. The phrase conjures the community's exercise of biopower through its gender-adjusted autonomous governance and its efforts to build sustainable life against the violent neoliberal deployments of biopolitics. When Poncho asserts "we are still standing," he conveys the colonia's determination and persistence. The "we" he refers to is a plural social body comprised of multiple physical bodies whose claim to existence is rooted in a particular place. To be still standing affirms a position as capable social and political subjects who are in fact not standing still. It carries the sense of refusing to give up or give in, of being unvanquished, and in a position to act. To be "still standing" in the sense Poncho gives it is to be more than survivors; it is to have arrived at a place of knowledge, a stance that recognizes one's situation on this contested terrain, at the crossroads between necessity and freedom in a history that shapes the conditions of life here and now but also reaches across far-flung power relations and alliances.

As we look to the future, it is almost certain that the hard rock of necessity will continue to press upon fragile collective bonds and threaten to squelch belief in possibility. The North-South Encuentros taking place in Mexico are evidence that from bare life new political subjects are being born. Their history is particular to local communities and it is shaped by forces and conditions that are not of their own making, but it is also being seized by people who teach one another and together assert a new stance as political actors committed to nourishing life, amending what is, and creating openings for what might be through alliances that are national and international in scope. Here in the space between structure and will, in the face of a precarious present and an uncertain future, gender adjustments are part of the daily praxis consolidating biopower from below.

Notes

[1] The Spanish phrase "*comunidades de base*" translates colloquially as "grassroots communities." It circulated in the discourse of liberation theology in Latin America which urged pastoral outreach to the poor, but it is now used commonly in secular organizing efforts.

[2] Stephen et al. use the phrase "dissident women" for women's movement activity that defies categorization as traditionally "feminist" or "leftist" (33).

[3] In the last decades of the twentieth century, Latin American feminists have had close and uneasy connections to the socialist Left. The critiques of ardent socialist supporters alienated by a male dominated Left's lack of interest in women's issues have been well documented (Alvarez 2003; Miller; Molyneux; Randall). When feminists claimed the autonomy of their movement in the 1970s and early 1980s, "autonomy" was invoked almost exclusively in relation to these frustrations (Alvarez 542). In this context, many feminists with backgrounds in Left parties or revolutionary movements questioned the supposed gender neutrality of the socialist project, argued that gender oppression transcended capitalist exploitation, and set up independent organizations, collectives, study centers and "cr" groups (Alvarez 2003, 542).

[4] In her comments in Blanca Navidad on May 12, 2007, Comandante Myriam referred to the indigenous peoples of Chiapas as the country's "most forgotten ones." See also Gilmore on organizing taking place in "forgotten places.

[5] The North-South Encuentros formally began in 2004, but technically the first encounter between factory workers from the north and the Zapatistas took place in 2001 when a delegation of workers attended the Zapatista's presentation to the Mexican Congress at the culmination of their "March for Indigenous Dignity," an appeal to honor the Accords the government signed with them in 1996.

[6] Here I am drawing upon Olivera's distinction between gender situation and gender condition, where gender situation refers to specific practices in a local setting while gender condition connotes prevailing social norms.

[7] See Staudt for an important analysis of grassroots organizing on the invisible problem of domestic violence as a widespread feature of women's gender situation and condition in the Juarez-El Paso border region of Mexico. For overviews of the accomplishments and challenges of Mexican feminism, see Lamas.

[8] Among all Latin American countries, Mexico has the largest absolute number of citizens who define themselves as "indigenous"—around 12 million people. States with the highest proportion are in the south: Yucatan, Oaxaca, Quintana Roo, Chiapas, and Campeche (Gledhill 485).

[9] Under NAFTA, all non-tariff barriers to agricultural trade between the United States and Mexico were eliminated. In January 2008 NAFTA's Agricultural Provisions were completed and they did away with tariffs on corn, dry edible beans, sugar, non-fat dry milk, and high fructose corn syrup. The resulting impact on Mexican agriculture has been a detonator for migration from agricultural regions, including Chiapas.

[10] Maquiladoras are factories where production is primarily assembly for export—parts are brought in by truck, put together, and then the trucks carry the finished products out to the malls and shopping centers in the U.S.

[11] It is difficult to determine exactly how many maquiladoras there are in Mexico now because since 2006 the Mexican National Institute for Statistics (INEGI) has stopped counting maquiladoras as a separate production sector (Arroyo).

[12] For further commentary on CJM's history as a pioneer in the challenging development of counter-hegemonic practices that link local issues to global processes see Bandy; Bandy and Bickham Mendez; Williams. A significant fact in CJM's history is that after 1996 governing board leadership was over 50% Mexican, and by 2004 there was a strong presence of Mexican grassroots organizations on the Board.

[13] For extended discussion of the multiple understandings of autonomy among Mexican indigenous groups see Stephen "Zapatista Opening" and "Redefined."

[14] Melissa Wright has argued that as bodies are worn down in assembly work the hurtful wasting away of a disposable workforce creates value for the company. She explains how this process in Mexico's factories depends on the myth of the disposable woman worker whose value lies in the fact that she is quick turnover. To be a quick turnover means that every day as her body is being worn down she is "waste in the making." But this "waste in the making" is the mark of her value to the company. Her unskilled labor will never be a candidate for the higher costs to the company of skilled labor, a promotion, or seniority. Once her body is used up she will simply be replaced by another feminized worker.

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