New Life: Negotiating Indigenous Women's Identity in the Context of Globalization

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Angela K. Miller
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Introduction

On April 11, 2011, I took the 40 minute taxi ride from Oaxaca, Mexico, to Teotitlán del Valle, a small community where I would spend the next month conducting my first original research project. I was a wide-eyed and eager 20-year-old, armed with my backpack and ready to jump into the field. After knocking on the door of the cooperative that was the focus of my study, I found myself face to face with Abril and Luz, two of the cooperative’s members. I enthusiastically shook their hands and kissed their cheeks, as is the customary greeting in Oaxaca. Both women gave me a confused look and backed away a few steps. Less than five minutes after arrival, I had my first lesson in Zapotec culture. Upon meeting someone, Zapotec women gently put their hands together, more of a hand-tap than a handshake. I would later learn that, when greeting one’s elder, it is customary to lay one’s right hand above that of the elder while putting one’s left hand on the other side of the elder’s hand, all while bowing slightly.

After apologizing for the cheek kissing, I sat down with Luz and Abril to get to know a bit about them. As an icebreaker, Luz asked me, “Are you married?” When I responded “no,” she amended the question to, “well, do you have a finance?” Again, my answer was “no,” and her question was changed to, “at least you have a boyfriend, right?” My final “no” was followed by a look of horror mingled with concern. My undergraduate thesis was off to a worrying start.

This introduction attempts to explain how a 20-year-old undergraduate student came to conduct an ethnography of a cooperative in southern Mexico, and to provide an
Two years ago, I began researching where I wanted to study abroad. I desired a country that spoke Spanish, which I had studied since the age of six, and that would be relevant to my life in the United States. For these reasons, I chose Mexico, a place that, because of its geographical proximity and economy, has strong relations with my own nation. As a student of International Studies and Anthropology, I also sought a program that would allow me to interact with locals outside of a classroom setting. I decided on SIT World Learning and its program “Sustainable Development and Social Change,” based in the city of Oaxaca de Juarez. During my three months in Oaxaca, I learned about climate change, neoliberalism, and migration, all of which are gravely affecting the indigenous communities of Oaxaca. But with the majority of the lectures, I felt that the message was too pessimistic, that Mexicans were fighting an impossible battle against the world’s hegemonic powers. My yearning to find a brighter viewpoint led to me spend the last month of my stay conducting an independent study project in the community of Teotitlán del Valle.

Teotitlán del Valle is home to Novel Creación (New Creation), a women’s weaving cooperative comprised of twelve Zapotec women of ages 20 to 75. Founded in 1996, the organization has fundamentally changed the social fibers of the village. This paper is an attempt to document and dissect those alterations through several different lenses.¹

¹ The women’s conceptions of themselves and the way in which others conceive of the women, understood collectively as the women’s identity, is fluid and constantly changing; therefore, my attempt is to show how the women of Novel Creación define their identities in 2011. I use the present tense throughout the paper, not as an attempt to narrow or solidify the women’s identities, but rather as a convenient way to separate the time before the
“Teotitlán del Valle is an indigenous Zapotec community of approximately 5,000 (including Teotitecos living elsewhere) located in the foothills of the Sierra Juárez 29 kilometers from the state capital, Oaxaca.” The state of Oaxaca, located in southeast Mexico, differs from the country’s other 31 states in several ways. According to the 2000 census, Oaxaca had a population of 3,578,000. 70 percent of Oaxaca’s population identifies itself as belonging to 16 indigenous groups, the largest of which are the Mixtecs and the Zapotecs. The 2000 census states that 1,120,312 Oaxacans “were speakers of an indigenous language,” and the primary language spoken in Teotitlán is Zapotec. Oaxaca is the “second poorest state in Mexico, over 46 percent of the municipalities have a high degree of poverty.” In the 1980 census, 167 people in Teotitlán, “or 4.3 percent of the population, over the age of 10 were registered as having an education beyond primary school...In the year 2000, 27.8 percent of the population over the age of 12 had some kind of education beyond elementary school. Twenty-two percent of those with education beyond the primary level were women and 68 percent were men.”

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cooperative was founded from the time after Novel Creación was formed. Furthermore, I use the term 'norm' as a benchmark to describe what the women perceive to be the shared values of their community. In reality, these values are always being re-interpreted; therefore, when I speak of ‘traditions,’ I am referring to the ways of living demonstrated by the oldest generation.

4 Ibid., 3.
5 Stephen, 93.
6 Ibid., 95.
7 Ibid., 118-119.
Despite bleak statistical figures, Teotitlán is not a “romantic indigenous backwater, but an integral part of the world today.”\textsuperscript{8} “In response to the neoliberal project that washes its hand of marginal populations,” the peasant population of Oaxaca is transforming its economies and society in response to external conditions.”\textsuperscript{9} Teotitlán is a self-described weaving village, meaning that nearly every family in the community makes textiles at least as a part-time job. Weaving has a long history in the community. According to the village’s museum, “at the end of the 15\textsuperscript{th} century, a Teotitlán ruler belonged to the Coyolapan province that gave tribute to Montezuma’s empire. Every three months they would send... 800 measures of large blankets to Tenochtitlan.” Then, under Spanish colonial rule, “the first bishop from Oaxaca, Lopez de Zarate, brought sheep from Europe to Teotitlán between 1535 and 1555. He also introduced the floor loom...Since then the ancestors adopted these new techniques and combined it with their own designs creating a unique form of artistic expression.” Tourism from the rug market comprises much of Teotitecan’s income.

In the first chapter, I analyze the women’s impact through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of capital, attempting to pinpoint how the women’s attempt to gain economic resources has resulted in their attainment of cultural and social assets. The first section will focus on economic capital, purporting that, through their involvement with the global market, the women of Novel Creación have gained financial influence in Teotitlán del Valle. The second section will use the idea of cultural capital to show how they have used this power to purchase material possessions and to fund and engage in educational opportunities. The third section will elaborate on the idea of social capital to show how the

\textsuperscript{8} Martha Woodson Rees, “Review of ‘Class, Ethnicity, and Community in Southern Mexico: Oaxaca’s Peasantries’ by Colin Clarke,” (Decatur: Agnes Scott College, 2003), 240.

\textsuperscript{9} Ibid., 240.
women's economic and cultural capital have led local authorities to consider the women to be powerful political figures. Finally, chapter one will argue that, as a result of their rise to local power, the women of Novel Creación have modified local conceptions of feminine Zapotec identity.

The second chapter uses subaltern theory to investigate how the rug market has shaped indigenous identity in Teotitlán. The first section will describe and analyze the identity being reinterpreted and reinforced by multiple aspects of local governance in Teotitlán del Valle. Furthermore, this section will dissect how Novel Creación has impacted both conceptions of indigenous and female identity through its involvement with formal political structures. Finally, this chapter will examine the role of Teotitlán del Valle within the broader web of indigenous social movements and changing international power relations.

In the third chapter, I elaborate on the idea that the women have altered cultural norms by exploring notions of gender identity in Teotitlán. By describing the ways in which the cooperative has disputed gender norms (using the oldest generation as a benchmark), this chapter will expand upon what participating in the formal economic sector has meant for women in Teotitlán. Since “hierarchies such as those of gender are constructed or legitimized” through “multiple rather than single causes,” 10 “the category of women is constructed in a variety of political contexts that often exist simultaneously and overlaid on top of one another.” 11 Therefore, this chapter will focus on how gender is interpreted and re-interpreted by Novel Creación in the areas of education, marriage, and household responsibilities.

Methodology

For this investigation, I used the anthropological research method of ethnography. The goal of this technique is to “grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world.” Ethnography is a science “in which natural social processes are studied as they happen (in ‘the field’ rather than in the laboratory) and left relatively undisturbed.” This involves a combination of formal interviews, informal interviews, and participant-observation, defined as “a qualitative method for gathering data that involves developing a sustained relationship with people while they go about their normal activities.” Ethnographic research methods allowed me to comprehend “the inponderabilia of actual life,” defined by Bronislow Malinowski as the “series of phenomena of great importance which cannot possibly be recorded by questioning or computing documents, but have to be observed in their full actuality.”

In an effort to abide by Malinowski’s suggestion that ethnographers dwell “right in their villages,” I spent 25 days living full-time in Teotitlán, interacting with three different families of the cooperative as they acted out their daily habits. Over this period of time, I conducted 26 interviews with ten members of the cooperative, one ex-member, and five relatives of members. Everything was conducted in Spanish, a language I have studied for 14 years. Spanish is the second language for every woman of the cooperative (their primary language is Zapotec) and for myself, and so it is possible that some ideas were communicated

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14 Ibid., 277.
15 Malinowski, 18.
16 Ibid., 6.
inaccurately. All translations were done by myself and checked for linguistic accuracy by my SIT World Learning in-country advisor Tzinnia Carranza. In an effort to abide by the ethnical guidelines of the American Anthropological Association and to protect the identities of my informants, all names have been changed, including the name of the cooperative. Teotitlán del Valle is the real name of the village, as there are multiple weaving cooperatives within Teotitlán and I feel that I can refer to the location without compromising the women’s safety or trust.

For the first 10 days of my stay, I lived in the house of Luz, a member of the cooperative, her mother, Mariana and her father, Esteban. I slept in Luz’s bedroom and she slept on an air mattress in her parent’s bedroom. Because of my age, I was adopted into their family as a child figure. From the second day of my stay, Mariana called me daughter, and even invented an elaborate story to explain why my skin is light-colored (‘guera’). She told anyone who came to visit the house that, long ago, she had an affair with a Canadian man. She gave him the child (me) and he returned to Canada. Now, two decades later, I returned from Canada to get to know my Zapotec family. Her two daughters, Luz and Itzel, call me sister (‘hermana’), and Itzel’s three sons, Luis, Octavio, and Pedro, call me aunt (‘tía’). While Itzel and her sons live one mile away with Itzel’s alcoholic and physically abusive husband, Emilio, they often visited Mariana and Esteban’s house. During times when Emilio was especially violent, Itzel and the boys would sleep at their grandparents’ house. When, after my study was over, my biological father came to visit me in Mexico, I took him to Teotitlán for a day. Mariana embraced him and exclaimed, “My old lover! You look exactly the same—just like I remember you!” She added, “Today I’m sad because I know you’re going to take my daughter away again.” I have kept in touch with the family since my return to the
United States through letters. In our correspondences, they still refer to me as a member of their family and ask when I will be returning to stay with them.

During the second part of my investigation, I spent 12 days living with Valeria; her daughters Abril, Alexa, Belinda, and Lucia; her brother, José; José’s daughter, Ximena; Belinda’s husband, Eduardo; and Belinda and Jose’s son, Iván. Their house is also the center of the cooperative. I slept in the bedroom of Alexa and Lucia, who moved into the bedroom shared by Valeria, Abril, and Ximena. Of the family, Valeria, Abril, Alexa, Belinda, and Lucia are members of the cooperative.

For the final three days of my stay, I lived with Fernanda, a member of the cooperative; her husband, Andrés; her son, Daniel; Andrés’s mother, Beatriz; and Andrés’s sister-in-law, Carmen. I had planned on living with the third family for another week, but a stomach parasite forced me to return to the city of Oaxaca early to seek medical care. The family’s bedroom is comprised of two beds placed in their altar/dining room and sectioned off by a curtain. I was given one of the beds and Beatriz and Carmen occupied the other. Fernanda, Andrés, and Daniel slept on the floor of their dining room. With each family, I offered to sleep on the floor so as to not displace anyone from their own bed; however, each family insisted that I have a bed to myself.

I attempted to place as small of a barrier as possible between my informants and myself. I dressed in long skirts, jeans, and t-shirts, similar to the attire worn by villagers my age. I kept my laptop in my bedroom and owned no ipod or other electronic devices to separate me from my informants. My rented Mexican cell phone, which did not get reception in Teotitlán, was also left in my room.
To collect data, I used the technique of “intensive (depth) interviewing,” defined as a “qualitative method that involves open-ended, relatively unstructured questioning in which the interviewer seeks in-depth information on the interviewee’s feelings, experiences, and perceptions.”17 I began my study using a handheld voice recorder to document interviews; however, this made informants uncomfortable. After using it for two interviews, I stopped and only took notes in a notebook. I followed “the usual procedure” for ethnographies, which “is to jot down brief notes about highlights of the observation period. These brief notes (called jottings) can then serve as memory joggers when writing the actual field notes at a later session.”18 Immediately following interviews and observations, I retreated to my room to record detailed accounts and quotations.

As Carol Stack explains in the methodology section of her seminal work, *All Our Kin*, “Members of a culture have biases that affect their perceptions of themselves and their life ways; outsiders bring biases to the cultures they study.”19 As a result, “Anthropologists often find that the people with whom they are working have problems with what they write about them.”20 In an effort to remove my own cultural lens, I reviewed my observations with my informants several times a week. I used pseudonyms when conversing about other subjects, so as to not violate the confidentiality of information. These discussions of my project, by making my findings transparent to my interlocutors, helped create trust between the women and myself and provided me with a deeper understanding of the incidents I observed. Manuel Castells, in *The Power of Identity*, suggests that the social science researcher accept that

17 Schutt, 277.
18 Ibid., 293.
“social movements...are what they say they are...this approach takes us away from the hazardous task of interpreting the ‘true’ consciousness of movements.”21 By sharing my findings with the women I studied, I opened myself to their criticism and accepted their own analyses of their accomplishments.

Stack also warns, “the relationship between the researcher and his subjects, by definition, resembles that of the oppressor and the oppressed, because it is the oppressor who defines the problem, the nature of the research...neo-colonialism prevents most social researching from being able accurately to observe and analyze.”22 During my fieldwork, I attempted to remain conscious of my positionality as an American and member of a society that has systematically and historically oppressed indigenous groups. As a self-described western feminist, I am also aware of my own tendency to associate changes to patriarchal systems with the adjective ‘good.’ I therefore “wish to avoid producing the ‘Third World Woman’ as a singular monolithic subject who fits into particular analytic categories employed in writings...which take as their primary point of reference feminist interests as they have been articulated in the US.”23 The tendency of some “western feminist discourse on women in the third world” is to construct “‘third-world women’ as a homogenous ‘powerless’ group often located as implicit victims of particular cultural and socio-economic systems.”24 This paper contributes to the field by giving voice to ‘third-world’ women while acknowledging the differences between these women, even within one cooperative. My attempt is to reject the description of “third-world women as subjects outside of social relations,” and to instead deconstruct “the way women are constituted as women,” and in this

21 Manuel Castells, The Power of Identity, (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 1997), 73.
22 Joyce Ladner, Quoted in Stack, xiv.
23 Mohanty, 196.
24 Ibid., 200.
case as ‘Zapotec women,’ “through the… structures” of business, kinship, and government.\textsuperscript{25}

The results of this study are not meant to be extrapolated; they reflect only the stories and lives of the women of Novel Creación.

\textsuperscript{25} Mohanty, 213.
Bibliography


Chapter 1: Capital in Teotitlán del Valle

Introduction

What are the economic, social, and political consequences of the women’s attempt to gain economic capital in their community and in the world? Pierre Bourdieu, in his seminal article “The Forms of Capital,” broadly defines capital as “accumulated labor...which, when appropriated...by agents...enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor.”26 This chapter will demonstrate, through the example of Novel Creación, that power, which “consists of a relationship between individuals, groups, or societies,” is correlated to capital.27 An individual or group that has social, cultural, and economic capital has power over what constitutes capital in his or her community. That is, those with the resources to dominate the group are those who then have the ability to alter the system.

In the introduction of Indigenous Movements, Self-Representation, and the State in Latin America, Kay Warren and Jean Jackson state that, “for anthropologists, the issue is not proving or disproving a particular essentialized view of culture but rather examining the ways essences are constructed in practice and disputed in political rhetoric.”28 Essentialization refers to the application of traditions for financial gain. My goal here is not to argue for or against Novel Creación’s commoditization of their indigenous female identities, but rather to analyze what the impact of this attempt at essentialization has been on the women and their community.

28 Ibid., 9.
Through their involvement with the global market, the women of Novel Creación have gained financial influence in Teotitlán del Valle. They have used this power to purchase material possessions and to fund and engage in educational opportunities that have led local authorities to consider the women to be powerful political figures. As a result of their rise to local power, the women of Novel Creación have modified local conceptions of feminine Zapotec identity.

**Why Now?**

The recent financial success of Novel Creación is connected to the proliferation of fair trade markets generated by globalization, defined as "the increasing flow of trade, finance, culture, ideas, and people brought about by the sophisticated technology of communications and travel, and by the worldwide spread of neoliberal capitalism." In her study of how indigenous social movements in Latin America have politicized their identities in the struggle against neoliberalism, Alison Brysk argues that one result of globalization is "norm-driven change," characterized by "new forms of interaction, new actors, and new messages... (which) change the underlying scripts of social life." She defines norms as "collective expectations about proper behavior for a given identity," pertaining to quotidian aspects of daily life—everything from how a woman ought to act when in church to what language people use to communicate in the village’s municipal government office. As new beliefs are introduced through schools, the internet, migration, and other aspects of globalization, "previous norms are ‘denaturalized’ and reexamined." Formerly "locally

30 Brysk, 31.
31 Ibid., 31.
32 Ibid., 31.
based identities intersect with other sources of meaning and social recognition, in a highly
diversified pattern that allows for alternative interpretations” and the creation of new ethnic
and gender standards.33

My attempt is not to suggest that globalization positively impacts indigenous peoples,
as the reality is that a multitude of atrocities have accompanied global integration under its
current neoliberalist model. In most cases, globalization has proliferated “a soulless
consumer capitalism that is rapidly transforming the world’s diverse populations into a
blandly uniform market.”34 In most of the world, free trade has led to the “absence of
democracy and of transparency (and) the governance of the international economic
institutions by and for special corporate and financial interests.”35 The fair trade movement,
on the other hand, “is a response to the failure of conventional (free) trade to deliver
sustainable livelihoods.”36 This alternative to free trade places “justice and sustainable
development...at the heart of trade structures and practices so that everyone, through their
work, can maintain a decent and dignified livelihood.”37 In the specific case of Novel
Creación, an unconventional model of globalization, characterized by fair trade and cultural
preservation, has created new spaces through which the cooperative has gained capital in and
altered the norms of Teotitlán del Valle.

**Economic Capital**

For the women of Novel Creación, change began in the form of economic capital.

Bourdieu defines economic capital as capital that is “immediately and directly convertible

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34 Manfred B. Steger, “Global Culture: Sameness or Difference?” in *Globalization—A Very
37 Ibid., 6.
into money and may be institutionalized in the forms of property rights.”38 The cooperative was founded so that the women could earn money to help support their families. Before 1996, a woman’s economic role was seen as one of passive spender, buying groceries and other necessities for her family with money made by her husband or sons. Women had previously helped men in their families to make the rugs (tapetes) by shearing and dyeing the yarn, but the men had been the ones to design, weave, market, and sell the goods. As Abril, the President of Novel Creación, explained, “We started with the idea to promote our crafts to sell directly to the consumer for a fair price.” While the women market the rugs as being purely their own creation, in reality, the gendered division of labor has not completely changed. Each house has its own weaving workshop, where the men, women, and children as young as eleven are involved with the one- to three-month long task of creating a rug. While the cooperative markets the rugs as being created by women, the reality is that, amongst many families in the cooperative, the men of the family are still the ones to weave the rugs. Weaving is the most time-consuming task, and members of the women’s cooperative still bear the brunt of domestic chores such as cooking, cleaning, and childcare. Women contribute to the process by cleaning, shearing, and dyeing the wool and yarn. However, because one of fair trade’s fundamental principles is to “help women realize their full potential and to get the respect in their communities that they deserve,” there’s a large demand globally for fair trade products crafted by female artists.39 It is therefore advantageous for the cooperative to market its products as female-only endeavors. Because the women have taken over the act of selling the products, they have gained control over the

38 Bourdieu, 2.
money that is generated by sales. A few of the women give the money they earn to their male relatives to manage, but most are now in charge of their families’ finances. This economic power enables the women to channel their income towards purchases that are a priority for them, such as education and technology.

By broadcasting through the Internet and local tourism organizations that their products are ‘authentically’ Zapotec and made by ‘impoverished’ women hoping to empower themselves, the cooperative connects with the global fair trade market. As Brysk explains, “powerless people can change their lives and their world by projecting new identities and ideas into the global arena.”

On the back of a postcard inviting tourists to visit the cooperative, Novel Creación writes (in English), “along with the rhythmic dance of their hands and their feet, wonderful rugs come out of the looms of these women who show in their work what it is like to live and feel as someone from Teotitlán del Valle.” By purchasing a tapestry, an English speaker has the opportunity to not just have a beautiful new commodity, but to purchase a piece of Zapotec culture and to glimpse what life is like for a hard-working and empowered Zapotec woman. The other side of the postcard shows all of the cooperative’s members wearing the maroon-colored skirts that Abril described as being “typical” of Teotitlán. Novel Creación has taken “advantage of a historical moment when the tourist industry and international funders are fascinated by the exotic.”

The use of their cultural identity, which includes “transcendent spirituality, ties to place, common descent, physical differences, cultural practices, shared language, and common histories of suffering,”

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40 Brysk, 53.
to support their financial business may be referred to as essentialization. The women have essentialized their indigenous and gender identities in order to resist “demeaning political imaginaries and policies and maintain a “crucial...degree of autonomy...within the world (neoliberalist) system.” Before the cooperative was founded, many of the women sold their rugs to foreign shopkeepers, who then resold them abroad, usually in the United States, for a much higher price. The result was economic hardship for many families, who did not have the business knowledge to demand higher wages for their work. One of fair trade and Novel Creación’s central goals is eliminate these middlemen, connecting artists directly to consumers and paying craftspeople a living salary. The cooperative, using the network of fair trade, ensures that the weaver is paid exactly as much for her work as the customer pays to acquire it.

The women’s economic gains are tangible. The cooperative currently sells upwards of 150 rugs a year at a price of approximately $100 each. Additional revenue is made by hosting around 20 students per year from various study abroad organizations. Each student pays approximately $18 per day for their stay, meaning that their total annual revenue (assuming each student stays for an average of two weeks) is about $20,040. Not including expenses, each woman currently earns around $1,822 annually, a significant amount considering that, in 2002, “53.7 percent of all Mexicans lived in poverty, defined as an income of less than... U.S. $548 a year.” The newest member of the cooperative, Ana, does not have a telephone, running water, an electric stove, or plumbing. Her house, where she

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42 Warren and Jackson, 9.
43 Ibid., 8.
45 “Empowering Women.”
46 Ibid.
lives with her dad, has three rooms: a courtyard, a bedroom, and a dining/alter room. In contrast, the oldest members, the four women of the Gutierrez family, have four cell phones, wireless Internet, three computers, an electric stove, and plumbing. Their house, which also serves as the center of the cooperative, has two courtyards, four bedrooms, a kitchen, two dining/alter rooms, and a bathroom.

The women’s economic capital allows them to leverage greater power within their community through the implementation of public service projects. Past activities included reforestation, wastebaskets, and environmentally friendly stoves. The community has responded positively to these projects. Alexa Gutierrez explained that, “At first, they (the municipal authorities) were surprised because they didn’t expect us to have this type of idea.”ii The community’s leaders were skeptical, Alexa claimed, because they doubted the women’s ability to be productive members of public society. But when they saw that the women were visibly improving the health of the community, they “said, ‘how great that you’re doing something to benefit the community.’ And they were very content and said, ‘whatever you need, you can count on us. If you need help or anything.’”iii By using their fiscal resources to give back to their community, the women have changed the way other members of their community interact with and perceive of women as equals.

Cultural Capital

Ted Lewellen (in Political Anthropology: An Introduction) defines cultural capital, in Bourdieuian terms, as “a largely unconscious set of predispositions that emerge from socialization into a particular class: ways of speaking and writing; a general awareness of how society works...and even posture and stride.”iv According to Bourdieu, cultural capital

iv Lewellen, 186.
“is convertible, on certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in
the forms of educational qualifications” or materialized in the form of degrees or licenses.48

The women of Novel Creación have used their economic power to access education
and thereby increase their cultural capital in both their community and in the nation of
Mexico. According to the 1980 census, in Teotitlán, “4.3 percent of the population over the
age of 10 were registered as having an education beyond primary school...In the year 2000,
27.8 percent of the population... had some kind of education beyond elementary school.
Twenty-two percent of those with education beyond the primary level were women.”49

Educational advances are evident in the Gutierrez family. Abril, the eldest sister of
the family, and Valeria, her mother, both have a first-grade education. Alexa and Lucia, the
youngest children, both attend university in the city of Oaxaca. However, the way in which
their education has changed their identity differs. Both girls are more comfortable speaking
Spanish than Zapotec and wear ‘western-style’ clothing—jeans and t-shirts—while their
older sisters and mother wear ‘traditional’ dresses (huipiles) and aprons (mandiles). Alexa,
who is majoring in English, stated that she does not envision herself returning to the
community fulltime, as she now identifies more as a Mexican than as a Zapotec. On the other
hand, Lucia still identifies as Zapotec and plans to return to the community after graduating
to teach at the local primary school. Lucia wishes to further politicize her identity and use her
cultural capital to empower youth to fight for their rights as indigenous people. As evidenced
by the Gutierrez sisters, changes to identity, brought about by an increase in cultural capital,
are not unidirectional across socio-economic classes.

48 Bourdieu, 2.
49 Lynn Stephen, Zapotec Women: Gender, Class, and Ethnicity in Globalized Oaxaca,
In 1999, with the help of an Oaxacan NGO called GAEM (Grupo de Apoyo a la Educación a la Mujer), Novel Creación began to hold twelve-week workshops to educate all of its members. The courses covered gendered problems persistent in the community, such as domestic abuse, alcoholism, and sexually transmitted diseases. In Teotitlán del Valle, Abril explained, these topics were "taboo; that is to say, the problems existed, but no one talked about them." The lessons the women learned in the cooperative’s center applied directly to their daily lives. For example, Fernanda claimed that "before I didn’t know that rape could occur between married people. I thought that you had to have sexual relations with your husband when he wanted it." Similarly, Lucia said, "before, in the market, I saw many women with their faces covered, because their husbands had hit them. But now you don’t see this physical violence as much." However, the cooperative’s work is not yet complete. Lucia believes that "there’s still a lot of emotional violence, and people aren’t conscious of the fact that this is violence." Oaxacan women’s rights advocate Tzinnia Carranza summarizes that to be an indigenous woman in the past meant identifying with the following three adjectives: "subordination, shyness, fear." As a result of the cooperative’s workshops, the community no longer purports that to be a Zapotec woman is to be submissive and passive to men.

The members have used their cultural capital to alter the community’s perceptions of Zapotec women. Women must leave their homes in order to participate in Novel Creación and to obtain a formal education. Unlike most women of the community, who are escorted around the village by their sons or husbands, the women of Novel Creación walk alone to to

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attend meetings at the cooperative’s center, to run errands around the town, and to sell their
tapestries in the local market. Abril explained that, when the cooperative started,

“For the culture (as a result of it) the women were criticized. They judged them
because they didn’t have anyone to control them because they didn’t have men in
their houses. The women were doing what they wanted, and they said we didn’t have
respect... They said that a woman ought to be in her house, not in the streets, and that
only men walk in the streets or in groups, and so (to them) we looked like men.”

Abril elaborated that the jokes towards the women of Novel Creación came from
multiple sectors of Teotitecan society. Other women in the village gossiped about them in the
marketplace, the men in the streets and on the bus. Today, Abril explained, young men in
particular recognize that women can be mothers and wives while participating in the
cooperative and leaving their houses without male permission. No longer do people call them
masculine for venturing outside of their homes unescorted. Abril credits the cooperative’s
visibility in the community with the change in expectations. Through their economic
contributions to their families and to the community, the members have created a new
paradigm of gender norms.

Social Capital

Bourdieu purports that social capital is “made up of social obligations... (and)
convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the
forms of a title of nobility.” Social capital includes “kin relations, circles of friends, and
influential... networks” which “provide each of its members with the backing of the
collectivity-owned capital.” Historically, in Mexico, these connections have been of prime
importance.

51 Bourdieu, 2.
52 Lewellen, 186.
53 Bourdieu, 8.
Internationally, the community of Teotitlán, with the help of Novel Creación, is projecting an image of neo-traditionalism in order to resist "the atomization and anomie that modernization implies." In other words, in order to resist the dividing effects of globalization and to foster identity tourism, the community is visibly politicizing its Zapotec identity particularly in the historic center ('zócalo') of the town. The zócalo comprises a large, open square, the municipal government building, an open-air market for rugs, and a museum detailing the history of the community. The market's vendors are members of the community and include the women of the cooperative. Each person in the community is allowed to sell his or her tapestries in the market for four weeks per year at a license fee of $2.70 (about 30 pesos) per week, paid to the municipal government. The majority of the sellers are women who wear huipiles and chat amongst themselves in Zapotec as their sons run around the square playing with one another. Two or three times a day, a bus filled with tourists pulls up on the southwest corner of the square. These tours often visit three or four villages, each known for a different folk art, in the span of a few hours. This system of identity tourism was fostered by President Luis Echeverría in the early 1970s and dubbed "guayabera diplomacy." The women’s clothing and language signal to customers that they are ‘real’ Zapotecs, as defined to tourists by the community’s museum. The museum, featuring signs in Zapotec, Spanish, and English, includes pieces of artifacts from ‘ancient’ Teotitlán, detailed models explaining the process of creating rugs, and figures in ‘traditional’ clothes performing cultural rituals such as marriage. Tourists learn what it means to be Zapotec from the museum and then ‘experience’ Zapotec life in the artisan market.

54 Lewellen, 161.
The women’s performance of their ethnicity for tourists is largely unconscious, as most of them wear huipiles and speak Zapotec at home as well. However, because their economic success depends on the projection of a well-publicized identity, the women’s lives are shaped by the image that they project to tourists. If, for example, the women were to shave their heads and wear mini-skirts to local government meetings, both the community and tourist organizations would likely withdraw some support from the group. The village’s power to differentiate itself from those around it to tourists provides the cooperative with additional capital only if the cooperative stays within the village’s advertised portrayals of Zapotec women. In Benito Juarez, another Zapotec village in Oaxaca, where tourism is not a main industry, women’s roles are less “traditional,” which, according to Belinda Gutierrez, whose husband is from Benito Juarez, means that women there have “a freedom that women here (in Teotitlán) lack.”

While tourism is not the only reason why ‘traditional’ Zapotec culture continues to thrive in Teotitlán, it is certainly a contributing factor to the community’s collective identity and social power.

The community also uses the social capital of its indigenous identity as a way to gain autonomy from the notoriously corrupt federal and state governments. The local government uses ‘usos y costumbres,’ a system of group decision-making supposedly used by the indigenous people of Mexico since before the Spanish conquest. In 1998, 418 of the 570 municipalities in Oaxaca opted for usos y costumbres and were recognized by the federal and state governments as semi-autonomous. The manner in which indigenous people organize themselves is “key, because it sets up relationships among people through allocation and

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control of resources and rewards.” The municipal government meets once a month at which
time they make all decisions concerning the community by consensus. Each family is
obligated to send at least one representative to the monthly assembly meetings but,
technically, anyone over the age of 18 is eligible to attend and vote.

For the women of Novel Creación, the cooperative is a network through which they
can leverage power within existing institutions, such as the municipal government. Women
never participated in assembly meetings until 1998, when eight members of the cooperative
accepted an invitation by the municipal president to attend as a group. According to Abril,
this president differed from his predecessors in that he was young and desired a change in the
way the community was organized politically. Abril described the women’s experience:

"We were a bit scared. The first two, three times, we didn’t give our opinions, we
only listened. But little by little we lost the fear. Little by little the people began to
accept us, but also other women heard that we went, from their husbands. And so the
other women said, 'I want to go to the meeting. What times do you all go, because I
want to go.' Even now the women all sit together at the meetings, and now the
women take up almost the majority of seats!" 

Because of their economic contributions to the village, the women of Novel Creación
were able to gain social capital through their participation in assemblies. Furthermore, the
cooperative’s entrance empowered other women in the community to also publically
participate in the local government. In describing the impact of indigenous social movements
on the groups they represent, Alison Brysk states, “building identity is an active and
interactive process...as movements make claims (like self-determination), they also build
new ways of understanding themselves.” As the women of Novel Creación attempt to use
their gender and ethnicity to claim that they ought to be included in processes of public

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58 Brysk, 35.
decision-making, they are altering what it means to be a Zapotec woman. Two decades ago, the municipality’s purported idea of a Zapotec woman did not include participation in local politics. Now, because of Novel Creación’s claim that women ought to be included in local decision-making, the norm is for women to actively participate in local issues.

By attempting to gain economic capital, the women of Novel Creación have gained cultural, social, and political power as well. On a local, national, and international level, the women of Novel Creación’s attempts to gain capital are impacting how other members of their community conceptualize Zapotec women. As globalization continues to take hold in Teotitlán, gender and ethnic norms will continue to change.
Bibliography


Chapter 2: Subaltern in Politics

Introduction

The community of Teotitlán del Valle portrays itself as a ‘traditional’ indigenous Zapotec village. The “real question is how, from what, by whom, and for what?” The aim of this chapter is to describe and analyze the indigenous identity being reinterpreted and reinforced by multiple aspects of local governance in Teotitlán del Valle, including the indigenous/Zapotec political system. Furthermore, this section will dissect how Novel Creación has impacted both conceptions of indigenous and female identity through its involvement with formal political structures. Finally, this chapter will examine the role of Teotitlán del Valle within the broader web of indigenous social movements and changing international power relations.

Positionality

In his seminal study of the relationship between social anthropology and social movements, John Glenhill claims, “many anthropologists choose to work with indigenous peoples who are demanding that states and transnational capitalist enterprises recognize their rights and make restitution for past injustices.” Because many of these researchers are from the countries, such as the U.S., that headquarter the transnational corporations to which Glenhill is referring, the social scientist must remain cognoscente of his or her role within these international power structures.

As a result of their attempt to bridge the gap between the oppressed and the oppressor, anthropologists are often tempted to choose a side. While some academics purport that anthropologists remain neutral, Glenhill argues, “It is not clear that any academic

59 Castells, 7.
knowledge can legitimately claim ‘objectivity’ and ‘detachment’ or that academics can avoid ‘taking a stance,’ even if they remain silent.”61 After all, “the simple act of arranging to stay in the house of someone can be construed as a political message.”62 Bearing in mind my relationship to the free market capitalist system in which I was raised, my goal throughout this research project, and particularly in this chapter, is to “think reflexively about (my) relationship with (my) subjects...recognizing that this relationship involves various dimensions of power.”63

Similarly, the following discussion on indigenous identity requires the reassessment of power dynamics between the community and me. The cooperative is part of a subaltern class, defined “as anyone who is subordinated ‘in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way.”64 Because these women have historically been “muted,” Subaltern theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak suggests that the postcolonial intellectual “learn to speak to (rather than listen to or speak for)...the subaltern woman,” with the goal of “unlearn(ing) female privilege.”65 By exploring issues of international power relations with the women throughout my time in the field, I gained the women’s “permission to narrate” their story; to pause outside of my own cultural lens long enough to document their world as they understand it to be.

61 Glenhill, 215.
62 Ibid., 235.
63 Ibid., 216.
Why Now?

Indigenous movements in Mexico are gathering steam in the 21st century as a reaction to global warming, international trade agreements (NAFTA), and the success of similar groups (the Zapatistas). The first two categories are threatening the survival of Teotitlán’s residents by challenging local abilities to grow food and earn a living wage. On the other hand, the Zapatistas represent how transnational activists are re-appropriating international discourses, such as that of feminism, to fit micro-cultures. All three of these categories shape the way in which the Zapotec political system is facilitating power relations within Teotitlán.

The Zapotec indigenous group has lived in what is now the Mexican state of Oaxaca since at least 300 B.C.E., when they began construction on the city of Monte Albán, the ruins of which are 28 km (17.4 miles) from Teotitlán. Despite their indigenous heritage, “agrarian reforms (such as) the Mexican ejido movement in the 1930s...defined Indians as peasants and established them in a patronage system as essential parts of nation-building and modernization projects.

Mexico’s rural communities were redefined on a national level in the early 1970s by the policies of President Luis Echeverría, who used “guayabera diplomacy” to foster tourism in the countryside. Neoliberalism, which began penetrating the village following the implementation of NAFTA in 1994, expanded upon earlier reforms. It further replaced the

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“corporatist model” of the 1930s with a model “based on individual citizenship, autonomy, and responsibility.” As a result of both President Echeverria’s policies and neoliberalism, it became politically advantageous for communities like Teotitlán to reclaim their indigenous past. They began to once again identify themselves publicly as Zapotec Indians rather than as peasants in order to “retain collective control over resources, property and cultural expression.” This attempt at strategic essentialism is not limited to Teotitlán. “For those social actors…resisting the individualization…attached to life in the global networks of power and wealth, cultural communes…seem to provide the main alternative for the construction of meaning.” While this study only represents a small community, the themes it presents speak to greater trends and issues of the globalized world.

**Zapotec Political System**

Teotitlán’s shared indigenous identity, expressed through the Zapotec political system is, as Manuel Castells notes, a “source of meaning and experience.” The socially-constructed identity of ‘Zapotec’ is never altogether separable from claims to be known in specific ways by others.” In the case of Teotitlán, this section will show how the community utilizes the Zapotec political system in order to give voice to subaltern citizens of Mexico.

Since the arrival of Europeans, indigenous communities in Mexico have been exploited and oppressed. Even after gaining its independence from Spain, national power relations perpetuated the imperialist mindset that kept indigenous populations marginalized

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69 Postero and Zamosc, 21.
70 Ibid., 22.
71 Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity*, (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 1997), 68.
72 Ibid., 6.
73 Ibid., 6.
and invisible. "As a result, Indians continue to be among the poorest and most marginalized members of their societies." Politically, on a national level, "indigenous people have not been able to effectively exercise their political rights...their votes have not...translated into political power." In an effort to gain power nationally and facilitate local issues that have been ignored by state and federal governments, indigenous groups have developed their own structures of self-governance. A political system can be defined as "the process by which plays of power and knowledge constitute identity and experience." As such, the local political organizations also operate as the site wherein indigenous and gender identities are contested and reinterpreted.

One method in which these impoverished rural communities assert control over their lives is through the use of usos y costumbres (uses and customs), a semi-autonomous political system. In 1998, "of the 570 municipalities in the state of Oaxaca, 418 of them opted for usos y costumbres." One of these municipalities was Teotitlán, which has been a municipal center since Mexican independence. The main features of the governance structure are assemblies and civil servant jobs.

Assembly

Once a month Teotitlán holds a municipality-wide assembly. Sending one member of each nuclear family to the meeting is an obligation, and those who do not attend are fined. As Mexican scholar Benjamín Maldonado Alvarado has argued, in these communities, a person

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74 Postero and Zamosc, 18.
75 Ibid., 18.
is “not an inherent member, but rather one becomes a member through his or her actions. All the adults have the moral (and financial) obligation to be a part of the communal power, attending the general assemblies.” In order to be considered part of the Zapotec identity, one must participate in communal life; to attend these meetings is to be Zapotec. At assemblies, the community “elects their authorities, discusses problems, generates agreements, and mandates.” All decisions are made by consensus and in the language of Zapotec. Officially, anyone over the age of 18 can attend and vote in the meetings, although each nuclear family is required to send just one person.

Recent changes within Teotitlán’s local governance structure are broadening the community’s indigenous identity to include female perspectives. As Alison Brysk states in her study of indigenous social movements, “the boundaries of ethnic mobilization for indigenous groups are unusually imprecise and multiple, with overlapping identities.” The assembly meetings offer one example of a gendered space wherein ideas about what it means to be a Zapotec man or woman are changing. Historically, only men attended assemblies. “The only way women could become full comuneras (full members of the community) was as widowed or single heads of household; and these were usually unenviable positions.” Teotitlán currently has 135 comuneras, 40 of which are widows. The involvement of women in assemblies began to change in 1998, when, Abril explained,

“We decided to formalize our group (Novel Creación), and so we went to present ourselves to the municipal authority. The president in this time was a good person. His name was Renaldo González. He invited us to go to the assembly. And so that was when we started to participate, as a group. The first time was really hard because

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78 Alvarado, 4.
79 Ibid., 5.
80 Brysk, 38.
we were very nervous and scared. When we arrived there were already a lot of men. There were eight of us and everyone was watching us. The first two, three times, we didn’t give our opinions, we only listened. But little by little we became less scared. Little by little the people (the men) began to accept us, but also other women heard that we went, because their husbands told them. And so there were other women who said, ‘I want to go to the meeting. What time do you go, because I want to go.’ Up until now the women all sit together and now almost the majority of seats are filled by women.”

As the assembly space was opened to women, they began to have a voice in local processes of decision-making. In the past, only subaltern men used the Zapotec political system as a mechanism for claiming power. Today, the cooperative acts as a site of negotiation for subaltern women. By fitting itself into existing systems, Novel Creación is expanding the Zapotec political system to give voice to the concerns of subaltern women.

Why did president González facilitate the cooperative’s entrance into the Zapotec political system? As both the feminist movement and the indigenous movement grew in Teotitlán, its leaders, such as president González, were influenced by similar movements within the country. For instance, the Zapatistas opened the path for women to achieve equality within indigenous political systems. Through their “Indigenous Women’s Petition,” Zapatista women demanded that they be given the same opportunities as their male peers to participate in what they term juntas del buen gobierno (good government committees), which are the Zapatista’s autonomous political organization. Zapatista women’s subordinate role inspired them to use local governance structures to gain power within global and local contexts. The success of these indigneous subaltern women made people like president González realize that, in order to leverage power on a national level, the community’s political boundaries must be stretched to include all people within Teotitlán.

Participation in the assemblies varies amongst the women of the cooperative. Of the oldest generation, both Valeria and Renata always attend the assemblies. “We can hear our
mom from here (our house),” joked Valeria’s daughter Abril, “because she always has to comment on everything, and she always speaks loudly.”

Because Renata’s husband is deceased, she is a full comunera and is obligated to represent her family at the meetings.

The opportunity to participate in formal politics is handled differently by the women based on their personal family situations and backgrounds. For instance, Belinda, the only member of the cooperative with a young son (Iván is two-years-old) never attends because she cannot bring her child with her. She purports that she will again attend the meetings once Iván is old enough to be left home alone. The mentality that women do not belong at the meetings is still persistent within certain members. “I don’t go, because I have my dad and he goes for me. The only women who go are those without male relatives,” claimed Luz. The difference in gender norms indicates that only male identity is contingent on participating in the political life of the community. When Alvarado wrote that a person is “not an inherent member, but rather one becomes a member through his or her actions,” he was referring only to the male subaltern. For a female, the decision to attend or to not attend has little to no impact on her identity as a Zapotec woman.

Amongst the younger members, most attend only when the meeting is about a topic important to them. Fernanda, for example, stated that she only goes when “it’s something important to me, like when they elected the drainage committee (responsible for managing the village’s water supply) last month.” Similarly, Camila explained, “My husband asks me, ‘do you want to come?’ but I don’t want to because they go until very late and, for me, many of the things they discuss aren’t very important.” Because the group must decide everything by a consensus vote, the meeting can last until one in the morning. The fact that

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82 Alvarado, 4.
many women choose not to attend despite invitations to do so speaks to the fact that local power relations are complex and varied. Women like Camila’s only motivation in going is to gain a public voice within the community. Because they are not subjected to the same pressure to maintain their Zapotec identity as their male relatives, the women’s decision to attend is based more on their interest in swaying local decisions.

**Community Service**

The second aspect of the Zapotec political system is community service. “All adults have the civil obligation to work for free on community projects such as *tequio,*” on municipal committees, and as politicians. 

*Tequio* refers to short-term projects, such as the construction of infrastructure or the cleanup after an earthquake. These usually last for one or two weekends during which time every adult member of the community, regardless of gender, is expected to contribute to the project. Both historically and today women supply food and water to the men who conduct the physical labor. “Mainly,” Lucia explained, women do not assist with the physical work of community projects “believe that they don’t have the physical strength.”

Committee members are elected by the assembly to manage the village’s water, electricity, schools, church, health center, garbage, and safety. Committee assignments last one to three years on average. These volunteers in Teotitlán do many of the tasks carried out by paid laborers in my home community in the U.S., such as garbage men, policemen, nurses, and plumbers. During their term of service, these committee members are responsible for making decisions about their subject while carrying out those decisions. For example, *el comité del agua* (the water committee) decides when the village’s wells are full enough to

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83 Alvarado, 5.
open the pipes and allow people to have water. In the dry season, the committee shuts down
the village’s water supply and people must venture to the wells on the edge of the community
to receive their rationed amount. The water committee is also responsible for fixing any
broken wells or pipes, often traveling to the nearby mountains to repair the system. The
community supports the families of these volunteers with food and services during their term.

Committee assignments in Teotitlán are based on gender. In the last 20 years, women
began serving on committees. They began on the DIF committee, which operates as a welfare
organization, giving necessary sustenance to disadvantaged families. Of the members of
Novel Creación, Fernanda and Camila have served on the DIF committee. The only other
committees with females are those of education and health. Lucia explained,

> “Women here think they can’t serve on the committees. Like with the water
committee, they believe that the members have to go to the mountain if something
breaks, and so they think that this is heavy work. But with water, women are the ones
who use it most, and the committee makes all the important decisions about who can
use water and when.”

Local efforts led by women like Lucia are slowly changing the composition of committees.
Tzinnia Carranza, an Oaxacan women’s rights advocate who works with indigenous groups,
is pushing for dual committees, in which women and men make decisions about resource
allocation while men carry out the physical repairs.84

One example of gender equality in Zapotec political structures is the cooperative’s
project Sembrando Vida (Planting Life). Every year, Novel Creación conducts a community
project in Teotitlán aimed at improving the community. In 2009 and 2010, they led a
reforestation effort in an area 5 km (3.1 miles) northwest of the village’s center. The

84 Tzinnia Carranza, Tejiendo Igualdad: Manual de Transversalización de la Perspectiva de
Género, (Mexico City: Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo, 2009), 63.
cooperative donated over 400 trees, and the authority called a *tequio* to plant them. The assembly, which the women can choose to attend, makes all decisions about the park’s use. A committee comprised of ten men takes care of watering and caring for the trees. Lucia believes that the tree committee, as it’s called, represents an effective power balance between genders.

The tree committee also represents the ways in which the community is using the Zapotec political system to resist global forces. “We are scared that one day we won’t have water,” Abril explained, “Like in the Sierras, there are some villages that have to buy water. It’s not just that we want a park, but that we want to put roots under the earth, to fortify the ground against earthquakes that threaten to divide it.” The women reiterated over and over again that global warming has brought an increased number of natural disasters to Teotitlán. When viewed from an international perspective, the community’s actions also signify their attempt to retain their communally owned land. In 1992, the Mexican government amended article 27 of the constitution to nationalize all subsurface soil. According to local accounts, the government then contracted out the aquifers below villages such as Teotitlán to foreign companies to be bottled and sold abroad. These metaphorical earthquakes are threatening the prosperity of indigenous villages in Oaxaca. While the purpose of NAFTA and of the amendments to article 27 “was to facilitate the entrance of U.S. capital into the Mexican economy,” the reality was much bleaker. “In Teotitlán del Valle, the 1990s brought considerable hardship… prices of basic goods went up, and prices for textiles remained

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The planting of trees signifies the village’s commitment to fight both global warming and neoliberalism.

The third aspect is that of political roles. Being a politician within the system is not a career; it’s a voluntary position akin to being on a committee. The mayor, called the president of the municipality, has never been a woman. When asked why this was, Luz responded, “Because it’s tradition. That’s what the people order.” Her statement elucidates the potency of patriarchalism in Teotitlán, a topic that will be further discussed in chapter three. “Women don’t change the system because they don’t believe in themselves,” Lucia retorted. Rather than questioning the historical validity and contemporary practicality of their ‘traditions,’ Luz continues to perpetuate the political values of a patriarchal society. Her example demonstrates that, while the female subaltern is gaining power within the Zapotec political system (in areas such as assemblies and community service), genuine integration has yet to be achieved.

**Social Structure**

Teotitlán’s citizens utilize a reciprocal and informal economic system in order to compensate for their marginalization within the nation-state. The main aspect of this indigenous system is called *guelaguetza*, which refers to a “system of economic exchanges in which long-term interest-free loans of goods, cash, and labor are made from one household to another.” This underground economy allows for a household to pay for rituals, such as weddings, without draining their financial resources or by taking out loans from commercial banks. One informant, Itzel, told me that she paid for her wedding through *guelaguetza* exchanges, which, twenty years later, she is still paying back. Specifically, her wedding

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87 Stephen, 218.
88 Ibid., 50.
celebration included a feast of 100 turkeys given by neighbors and friends. Over the years, as each one of these creditors has had celebrations or hardships of their own, Itzel has had to give them turkeys as repayment. Local power dynamics also impact these exchanges. The borrower, Itzel, is obligated to return to each lender a turkey of the same weight as the one consumed at her wedding. The specifics of these debts are recorded in notebooks, kept by each family in their home. Because the return (one turkey) is equal in value to the offering (one turkey of the same weight), guelaguetza is categorized as a balanced exchange.

The Zapatista movement illustrates the importance of the guelaguetza system. With their uprising in 1994, the Zapatistas challenged “the one-sided logic of modernization, characteristic of the new global order.” According to Zapatista philosophy, conceptions of economic exchanges “are deeply perspectival constructs, inflected by the historical, linguistic, and political situatedness of different sorts of actors.” Through this lens, the guelaguetza system can be understood as a way in which the subaltern increases its standard of living outside of ‘formal’ economic structures. The Zapatista movement has legitimized this alternative model of economic exchange by giving a voice, on an international level, to Mexico’s indigenous subaltern. The pattern of being denied their social, political, and cultural rights by the Mexican government has led indigenous movements like the Zapatistas and communities like Teotitlán to develop autonomous local systems of survival.

The maintenance of strong local networks has also become important in light of increasing emigration rates. “As many as 150,000 Mexicans are driven to migrate illegally to the United States each year, owing to a lack of real economic opportunities in the

89 Castells, 86.
I met dozens of people in Teotitlán who had spent time working in the U.S. or Canada, many of them family members of women in Novel Creación. Most of the transnational emigrants I met in Teotitlán were males. Emilio, Itzel’s husband, explained to me that, while it was difficult for him to leave his wife and children behind, their financial situation requires him to work as an agricultural laborer in Canada for three months out of the year. He told me that having community support both through extended kin networks and through *guelaguetza* was crucial to his family’s survival. As shown in chapter three, Emilio’s dependency on alcohol drains the family of many of their fiscal resources, but Itzel’s parents and sister always help them purchase food and school supplies for their three sons. Other members of the community have returned home from living abroad when called, by the assembly, to serve on a committee. The Zapotec social structure works to connect the village together financially and culturally at a time when many of its members are being pulled away.

**Conclusion**

The subaltern of Teotitlán is using local indigenous structures to claim power. Additionally, Novel Creación operates as a mechanism that allows subaltern women to gain a voice within their community’s political structures. These systems of self-governance also act as a site for re-conceptualizing Zapotec identity. In particular, the ways in which gender and ethnicity are contested in the village’s political system and social structures demonstrate how the Zapotec identity is shifting and broadening. Furthermore, this identity is influenced by outside forces, such as global warming, neoliberalism, and the Zapatistas, which serve to strengthen and deepen the reach of local governance structures.

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Bibliography


Chapter 3: Gender in Teotitlán del Valle

Introduction

Novel Creación has altered conceptions of what it means to be a woman in Teotitlán del Valle. In the years since the cooperative was founded, women’s roles in education, marriage, and the home have changed from what they were a generation ago. My attempt in this chapter is to focus on the micro-level relationships between genders in Teotitlán while alluding to how the achievements of the cooperative are impacted by the broader paradigm of globalization.

As “post-structuralist,” this chapter will “insist that meanings,” such as what characteristics constitute a woman or a man, “are not fixed in a culture’s lexicon but are rather dynamic, always potentially in flux.”92 On a basic level, “because participation in cooperatives often leads women to leave home and community for meetings or to sell their good, they are automatically challenging the gendered division of labor.”93 By describing the ways in which the cooperative has disputed gender norms, this chapter will expand upon what participating in the formal economic sector has meant for women in Teotitlán. Since “hierarchies such as those of gender are constructed or legitimized” through “multiple rather than single causes,”94 “the category of women is constructed in a variety of political contexts that often exist simultaneously and overlaid on top of one another.”95 Therefore, this chapter

94 Scott, 4.
will focus on how gender is interpreted and re-interpreted by Novel Creación in a variety of spaces and not just in the family unit.

This chapter will also unpack the ways in which the women of Novel Creación are still inferior to men, both in Teotitlán and in the broader world. Within several families of the cooperative, the norms of the generation that was born in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution still persist. Even if Novel Creación has challenged patriarchal structures within Teotitlán, the women are still subordinate to global structures that restrict gender equality. “It is ultimately patriarchy—understood as a system of material relationships and ideologies that subordinates women to men and which has its material base in men’s control of women’s labor power.”

Indeed, in the larger scheme of neoliberalism, the women of Novel Creación are increasingly dependent, not on men from their families or communities, but on the patriarchal free market that prioritizes the agendas of men in ‘developed’ nations.

**Education**

Education is one way in which knowledge is transmitted from one generation to the next. “I use knowledge, following Michel Foucault, to mean the understanding produced by cultures and societies of human relationships... Knowledge is a way of ordering the world; as such it is...inseparable from social organization.”

By analyzing who has been included in the formal education system (and therefore deemed worthy of understanding the group’s knowledge), this section will demonstrate how, because of changes to the educational system, gender structures have shifted since the founding of Novel Creación.

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97 Scott, 2.
The cooperative’s founder, Valeria, is 62-years-old. She attended two years of primary school. Completing this level of formal education is common among women of her generation: 75-year-old Renata finished three years of primary school and 72-year-old Mariana has no formal education. In Mariana’s words, the reason why she never learned to read or write was “because I am a woman. My parents were poor and, besides, the work of a woman is to make atole, tortillas, and soup.” According to Joan Scott, whose work was seminal in advocating for a feminized version of history, “Gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power.”

Mariana’s statement illuminates the patriarchal perspective that formal education belongs to men, not women. According to Mariana’s classification of gender roles, men have power in the institution of education, while women have power within the space of the kitchen. Furthermore, she considers these differences to be inherent, as evidenced by her use of the present tense when describing the relationship between herself and her gender. “I am a woman...the work of a woman is to make atole.” By connecting herself with the roles attributed to her gender, Mariana espoused her belief that, as a woman, she is different from men. Because of this difference, she did not have the power to attend school.

Similarly, the middle-aged women of the cooperative have only a small amount of formal education. Camila, a 32-year-old former member of the cooperative, and her sister, 48-year-old Paulina, both completed three years of primary school, but left because “my mom (Renata) said I had to learn the profession of a woman, which means to make tortillas and food.” Mariana’s 40-year-old daughter Luz also completed three years of school. 40-
year-old Karla has a fourth-grade education. When asked why she stopped attending, she replied: “in the past, women did not go to middle school.”xxix As Scott explained, “Gender becomes a way of denoting ‘cultural constructions’—the entirely social creation of ideas about appropriate roles for women and men... Gender is, in this definition, a social category imposed on a sexed body.”99 In the cases of Camila, Paulina, and Luz, their family structures determined that, because they were female, it was not suitable for them to continue with school.

Abril, the 40-year-old president of the cooperative, graduated from primary school. Her four younger half-siblings, she explained, “were very young, and I had to help with them. We had to buy uniforms, notebooks, pencils, everything for my siblings, and besides we had to buy food for everyone.”xxx Her example illustrates how economic factors influence and impede the ability of women to obtain a formal education. This case is a reminder that realities are often more complex that the binominal opposition between man and woman. Even in patriarchal societies, economic class differences hinder both men and women from learning.

Due in part to the “inseparably related processes of the transformation of women’s work and the transformation of women’s consciousness,” the youngest members of the cooperative have made significant gains in attaining an advanced education.100 For example, Lucia, Abril’s 20-year-old half-sister, is in her second year of university at José Vasconcelos, in the city of Oaxaca. She leaves for classes before five each morning, taking the hour-long bus ride into the city. She returns home about 2:00 each afternoon. In order to prepare her for

99 Scott, 32.
100 Manuel Castells, The Power of Identity, (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 1997), 193.
university, her mother sent her to high school (‘preparatoria’) in the region of the Sierra Norte, two hours from Teotitlán. She attended the school from ages 14 to 17, during which time she lived with a family near campus. She returned to Teotitlán during holidays and occasional weekends; however, Lucia purports that, because she had her own bedroom and a high level of independence in high school, she is having a hard time readjusting to living with her family in Teotitlán. When she graduates from university, she hopes to help students like herself by becoming a science teacher in an indigenous community such as Teotitlán. Formal education, she believes, is the best way to break the cycle of poverty that plagues many rural Mexican villages. The only other member of the cooperative to achieve an advanced education is Alexa, Lucia’s 27-year-old sister. Alexa is in her final year of studying English at the Cambridge Academy in Oaxaca. Their 26-year-old sister, Belinda, graduated from preparatory school at age 17 but did not attend university.

Educational achievements vary amongst the members of Novel Creación, but can generally be linked to their ages, genders, and families’ economic situations. In the years since the cooperative was founded, women have begun to attain a higher level of formal education. The relationship between education level and gender is cyclical: women break the socially constructed norm that the school is a masculine institution by sending their daughters to school. In turn, as they gain an education, the women are able to earn a higher living, which enables them to afford even more schooling.

Marriage

The institution of marriage is a central aspect of life in Teotitlán. According to a sign in the village’s community museum,
“The wedding is a very big and important event in the lives of all humans. The recently married couple assumes new rights and obligations. At the same time, matrimony is a social event because it happens with the help of many people. As far as anybody in Teotitlán remembers, many elements of it have stayed the same, while others have changed profoundly.”

This museum provides an example of the collective cultural memory of Teotitlán, or, at least, of the museum committee which plans the exhibits (see chapter two for more information on municipal committees). Designed to guide tourists through the “authentic” Zapotec experience of visiting the village, the museum describes the marriage ceremony as having been crafted by their ancestors over many centuries. Furthermore, the sign shows that marriage is an important contract to the community because its members chosen to showcase it in their museum.

An analysis of how marital norms have been formed within Teotitlán can be gleaned by studying the community’s history. Before the Spanish conquest in the 16th century, “the Zapotec political system...was controlled by a hereditary elite that was reinforced by alliances built through marriage... This no doubt encouraged the supervision of elite women’s sexual interactions.”\textsuperscript{101} Arising from this historical system is cultural expectation is that “everyone will marry young, and that the women will stay at home and care for the children.”\textsuperscript{xxxvi} While traditions are complex and never static, the society may be broadly classified as patriarchal and patrilocal, meaning that the male descent line is emphasized over the female’s and, following the wedding ceremony, the bride and groom move into the home of the groom’s parents.

Perspectives on marriage vary amongst members of the cooperative and their families. The oldest women involved in the cooperative demonstrate the gendered norms of

\textsuperscript{101} Stephens, 48.
marriage in Teotitlán. Renata, for example, married her husband at the age of 15. His early death, while their youngest daughter was in primary school, enabled her to join the cooperative. Mariana, whose daughter is in the cooperative, explained the origins of her marriage, “I met my husband many years ago. He robbed me, as they say.” In the past, Mariana elaborated, the cultural practice of stealing the bride was commonplace. In Mariana’s case, she was forcibly taken from their parents’ homes by her male admirer and brought to his parents’ house. In an effort to save Mariana’s honor (since it is presumed that sexual relations occurred following the kidnapping), Mariana’s father negotiated a marriage contact with Esteban. The implications of this system are evident in Mariana’s marriage to Esteban. For example, many aspects of her identity are dependent on those of her husband. When asked how old she was, Mariana responded, “I am 73.” She paused, thought for a minute, and clarified, “No. I am 72 because my man is 73.” Her first thought was to tell me her husband’s age, indicating that she considers herself to be an extension of him.

The cooperative’s founder, Valeria, is the only member of the older generation to break from the cultural norms. She has never been married and has five children, four daughters and one son, with two different men. She was shunned by both her peers and by her family’s friends for her life choices and only “kept going,” Abril explained, because her parents “forgave her mistakes” and allowed her to continue living in their home. Novel Creación was founded because of Valeria’s need to support five children in a village where, because she had children out of wedlock, she had difficult finding paid work.

Of the cooperative’s 12 members, only two are married. Fernanda, who met her husband Andrés while working in Tijuana, explained, “my husband and son (15-year-old Daniel) support me a lot. I’m lucky because the majority of the women, when they marry,
leave the cooperative because they don’t have the support of their families.”

The difference with her relationship, she believes, is that she established clear expectations from the beginning of her courtship with Andrés. “When we first met, I said to Andrés, ‘I’m fine living alone.’ In this time I was working in Tijuana, and I told him, ‘I like my liberty. I’ve seen how many husband beat their wives and don’t let them go out alone.’ I didn’t want that life so I told him that I never wanted to get married. But he promised me that we wouldn’t be like that.” When asked what she would do if Andrés did not uphold their agreement, Fernanda declared, “If he treated me badly, I’d leave. I wouldn’t stand for it. I can provide for myself, and for Daniel too if necessary. And so Andrés never tells me that I can’t go to Oaxaca with the cooperative, or go alone to visit Daniel at school, because he knows that I would leave him.” Fernanda attributes her and Andrés’s attitudes to their time spent living in Tijuana, where they each lived independently of their families and worked in tourist stores. Because Fernanda was able to earn her own salary, manage her spending, and travel where she desired, she was able to create a marriage different from those typical of Teotitlán’s older generations.

Belinda’s marriage is also restructuring the gendered norms of Teotitlán. As discussed in chapter one, her husband, Eduardo, is from the more liberal community of Benito Juarez. According to Belinda, the difference between her marriage and those of her peers is that she had the opportunity to continue living with her family of orientation, rather than moving in with her family of procreation. “If I had married a man from Teotitlán,” she explained, “I would have had to move in with his family, where I wouldn’t have had so much liberty.”
In the past, the cooperative has had up to 35 members, but many have left after becoming married. One former member, Camila, elaborated, “I left in 2007, when I married. In a marriage you respect what the parents of your husband say, especially in my case because I moved into their house. You have to be at the order of your in-laws. I married and everything went away.” Camila’s case demonstrates the differences in gender roles between generations. “My husband supports me,” she claimed, “He says to me, ‘if you want to go back, you have my support.’ We have a mutual respect for one another. I don’t have to ask his permission (to leave the house), but I consult him before I make decisions about my day and he does the same.”

Camila and her husband recently established their own household, which she hopes will enable her to return to the cooperative.

Many of the unmarried members of the organization attribute their single status to choice. Fernanda’s sister Karla declared, “I don’t know if I want to get married (ever). Here when someone is married, it’s difficult to continue forward. Here it’s very different” from where you are from in the U.S. “Here the in-laws have strong opinions. If you go out (of your house) a lot, your in-laws are going to say, ‘Where are you going? Why aren’t you at home?’” Similarly, Lucia explained, “I don’t want to stay at home and raise kids.” While women like Fernanda and Belinda are slowly changing the cultural norms, they are doing so by marrying men outside of Teotitlán. As Lucia clarified, if a woman wants to have freedom, she must either choose to not get married or to marry someone who is separated from the cultural practices of Teotitlán. While marriage norms are in the process of changing, Lucia still feels pressure to comply with the lifestyle of her grandparents.

Not all of the unmarried women think that gendered norms ought to be restructured. Abril explained, “being President (of Novel Creación) requires a lot of work,” and so, “if I
was to get married, I would leave the cooperative because I would like to dedicate myself to the home, to cooking and caring for a garden, and perhaps to have a cow for milk. When asked if this was a possibility, she admitted, “I would like to get married because I’m scared that my mom will die and my sisters will leave Teotitlán, and I will be left alone. And then what happens if I get sick or something?” For many women, the extended kin network created by marriage is an important support system in a country with limited social safety nets.

As a researcher, I too faced many of the cultural expectations surrounding marriage. In her article “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse,” Chandra TalpadeMohanty purports that “western feminist scholarship cannot avoid the challenge of situating itself and examining its role” in local frameworks. Expanding upon Mohanty’s idea, I take my own experiences as a young female to represent an apt cultural comparison between my own western ideas about marriage and those of Teotitlán. Whenever I met a new community member, among the first questions he or she asked me was, “are you married?” When I responded “no,” the question was usually amended to, “well, do you have a finance?” Again, my answer was “no,” and the question was changed to, “at least you have a boyfriend, right?” My final “no” was often followed by a look of horror mingled with worry. What intrigued me was that this conversation occurred with women such as Fernanda and Luz, whose views on marriage were otherwise different from those of the greater community.

Despite living a different lifestyle than their parents or peers, many of the women in Novel Creación still believe in the cultural construction/tradition that a woman needs a man in her life to feel fulfilled and successful. The perspective of these women demonstrates that,

\[102\] Mohanty, 198.
while many aspects of marriage in Teotitlán have changed as a result of the cooperative’s actions, the values of monogamy and heteronormativity remain potent.

**Household Responsibility**

Novel Creación is reshaping the norms of the private space, altering what the duties are for men and women within a household. Historically, in Teotitlán, women and girls are responsible for all chores within the home, while men are in charge of fiscal support. With the founding of the cooperative, women within certain families gained greater control over economic resources, allowing them to permeate spaces that were previously masculinized. Furthermore, because of their participation in the cooperative, many members had less time to devote to household responsibilities, meaning that men had to assume duties previously associated with the female gender. However, changes to household responsibilities are not universal, as several families of the cooperative have maintained old gender norms.

In the first family I stayed with, the ‘traditional’ gendered division of labor continues today. Luz and her mother, Mariana, wake up before her father, Esteban. If the family is running low on firewood or water, Mariana and Luz will wake up as early at 3 am to collect them outside of the village. Luz’s nephews escort her to the market, where she buys the family’s daily food. “Most women in the community, whether young or old, are concerned with protecting their sexual reputations. Many girls are still strictly watched, and not allowed to walk the streets alone after the age of 10 or 11,” and so Luz’s father forbids her to go to the market alone. Mariana tends to the family’s chickens and garden, picking any ripe chayote, limes, and pasote. Upon Luz’s return, about 7:30 am, the women begin cooking

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103 Stephen, 46.
breakfast, warming up any leftover soup from the night before and crafting tortillas over their wooden stove. Esteban arises about this time and begins weaving a tapestry on his loom before sitting down to eat about 9 am. Luz and Mariana spend their day cleaning, gardening, laundering, and cooking. If they have time, they will also prepare yarn for weaving: loosening, washing, carding, dyeing, and spinning the wool into bobbins. Esteban spends his day at the loom, stopping only to join the family for lunch (‘la comida’) about 2:30 pm. Luz’s family is patriarchal, meaning that Esteban, as a man, has an “institutionally enforced authority…over females and their children in the family unit.” Furthermore, his control “permeate(s) the entire organization of society, from production and consumption to politics, law, and culture.” As described in chapters one and two, Luz and her mother have little control over what they produce or consume. Esteban gives Luz the market money each morning on the condition that she buys food suitable to his likes. Esteban purchases the seeds that Mariana cares for in their garden, taking away her power to decide which plants to cultivate.

Other anthropologists have documented similar labor divisions. In her study of Teotitlán, Lynn Stephen explains, “men often weave in uninterrupted sessions, but most women sandwich their weaving in between meal preparations, animal care, and child care…Many (women) complain that since they have begun weaving they are working longer hours and no one is relieving them of their responsibilities.” In this sense, even though, from an outsider’s viewpoint, the women are in charge of selling the rugs, their production is subject to male approval. Men physically construct (on the loom) at least half of the rugs sold

104 Castells, 192-193.
105 Ibid., 192-193.
106 Stephen, 208.
by Novel Creación. Women contribute to the other steps of the rugs’ creation, but, in several families, men like Esteban own the means of production.

Esteban and Mariana’s other daughter, Itzel, is married and has her own residence about one mile away with her husband, Emilio, and their three sons, Luis (age 17), Octavio (age 11) and Pedro (age 7). However, Emilio is an abusive unemployed alcoholic, and so the boys spend much of their time living, eating, and sleeping at their grandparents’ house. Mariana and Luz therefore assume much of Itzel’s parental duties, such as feeding and bathing the boys as well as escorting them to school. During my time with the family, I acted as a tutor for the boys, helping them with their homework and teaching Pedro to read. Esteban is responsible for funding Itzel’s family; I witnessed several interactions between Esteban and Emilio involving money.

Luz had recently hosted another foreign student, Alice, who was still living in the city of Oaxaca. Alice and her brother Sam, who was visiting from Arizona, often came to Teotitlán for a daytrip. During one such instance, Alice and I were helping Luz, Itzel, and Mariana to make tortillas. Most of ours were disastrous: what started out as a perfect circle folded upon itself as we threw it on the fire, smoke burning our eyes as we attempted to turn it over before it burned. Finally, after many tries, we were able to successfully make tortillas that were recognizable as such. Everyone clapped as I took my first edible tortilla off the stove. Esteban, who had been watching with Emilio from afar, exclaimed, “Now you can get married to a proper man from Teotitlán!” The rest of the family nodded and voiced their agreement. Once you can make tortillas, Mariana explained, you are ready to get married! She began brainstorming, aloud, the names of possible suitors for me. I hastened to explain that my family back in the US was eager for my return, and that marrying a man in Teotitlán
and establishing residence in Mexico would upset them. With my urging, Sam then asked if he could try making a tortilla. Luz, Mariana, Itzel, Emilio, and Esteban laughed enthusiastically, explaining to us that men never made tortillas because it was the work of the women. Sam decided to try anyway, and, when he succeeded, Emilio joked that Sam was also now fit to marry a man from Teotitlán. Labeling Sam as effeminate and homosexual for wanting to do an activity not associated with his gender speaks to the potency of gender norms in the village. Men who help their female relatives with household responsibilities open themselves to criticism and ridicule. This discouragement acts to stop men from challenging previously established norms.

In Teotitlán, as women are primarily responsible for raising their offspring, they teach their sons and daughters what behaviors are expected of them. “Men from here are macho,” Itzel elucidated, “but the women are too because they teach their children to be like that.” In the case of tortilla making for example, Emilio and Itzel’s three sons told me that they would never help their mother, aunt, or grandmother cook because it was not their responsibility. The way in which their parents’ act is shaping how they perceive that they ought to act in order to be young men. At the age of 11, Octavio is learning how to weave, taking lessons from his father and elder brother on the duties of a man. In a year or two, Luz told me, he will leave school to work full time as a weaver.

The gendered division of household responsibilities exists for several other households of the cooperative as well. Ana, who lives with her father, explained, “I’m the housewife.” Because her mother is deceased, she is responsible for caring for the family’s chickens, garden, food, wood, water, and cleanliness. Usually water comes into one spout in the house from pipes connecting the village to the nearby forest. However, during the dry
season, the municipal council, comprised of ten men, shuts down the village’s water supply. Ana then has to carry buckets to public wells, dispersed throughout the village, in order to obtain water for her and her father. Each year, Mariana explained, it rains less and less and the dry season lasts longer. Ana purports that global warming has increased her workload, as she now has to travel farther to procure basic resources like water.

Karla, who cares for her elderly parents and similarly assumes the majority of work in her household, explained that the women of Novel Creación are masculinized or demonized for their work with the cooperative. “We are criticized,” she claimed, “the people say, ‘as they’re women, they have to stay at home!’” When asked who specifically critiques the members, she elaborated that it’s both “men in the streets and women in the market” who gossip about what the women’s actions likely indicate about them. Their assumption is that women who work outside of the homes either desire to be men or prostitutes. In this case, “the village... reinforce(s) the position of the patriarch by becoming the guardian of women’s morals.” As other scholars, such as John Castells, have documented, the members of the community who continue to prescribe to past norms fear that “the challenge to patriarchalism, and the crisis of the patriarchal family, (will) disturb the orderly sequence of transmitting cultural codes from generation to generation...thus forcing men, women, and children to find new ways of living.” Their xenophobia may be best understood by realizing that the community been devastated by global warming, emigration, and the global economic crisis. However, the threat of being ostracized from the community acts as a deterrent for many women who may otherwise wish to join the cooperative. Novel Creación used to have more members, Abril explained, but many left because the unrelenting criticism

108 Castells, 419-420.
from their families and friends was too much for them to tolerate. This statement
demonstrates that, while Novel Creación has made incremental changes to gender equality in
Teotitlán, older norms still persist. However, Abril believes that, as the community continues
to see the economic and social benefits of participation in the cooperative, their membership
will increase once again.

Normative behaviors are also demonstrated during holidays and celebrations. As
Lucia explained, “at parties, women cook and serve the men. Then they eat, separately.” I
witnessed this ritual during Holy Week, preceding Easter. Every day a parade stretches
through town, with offerings presented to statues of Jesus and Mary. The parade stops for
approximately 20 minutes at every street corner, as women bring food out of their houses,
giving plates of beans, rice, chicken, and ice cream to the men who carry the effigies. Lucia,
however, has a different view of how parties should occur. “I think that they all should serve
themselves and sit together,” she declared. She is not alone either; she elaborated that many
of her peers, who have achieved a higher level of education than their predecessors, think
that, while “we like our culture, we believe that there are aspects that ought to change.” “An
increasing proportion of children are born out of wedlock, and are usually kept by their
mothers... Thus, biological reproduction is assured, but outside traditional family
structure.” Lucia’s perspective is shaped by the fact that a single mother raised her. As
emigration rates increase in Teotitlán, many mothers are raising their children alone as their
partners live and work in the U.S. As the children of single mothers reach maturity, the
gendered division of rituals is changing.

109 Castells, 197.
Despite societal preferences, many families are reshaping how labor is divided within their households. "Women’s communes...project themselves into society...by undermining patriarchalism, and by reconstructing the family on a new, egalitarian basis."\(^{110}\) For instance, Belinda and her husband Eduardo share all duties within their home. They both cook, wash dishes, launder clothes, and change their two-year-old son’s diapers. In a complete shift in gender norms, Eduardo is responsible for collecting firewood and water for the family.

"Jose’s mother worked outside of the home," Belinda explained, when asked why Eduardo was willing to share the chores, "so since he was little he has cooked."\(^{111}\) Belinda’s statement alludes to how one’s upbringing impacts one’s perception of gender roles. Conceptions of how men and women ought to behave are transmitted to children through their parents, peers, and schools. In families like Valeria and Fernanda’s children are being taught an alternative view of gender roles, thus undermining “the ideology of patriarchalism legitimizing domination on the basis of the family provider’s privilege.”\(^{111}\) “You’ve seen Daniel,” Fernanda said to me, when I asked what were the characteristics of her parenting style, “he likes to cook and to help me. He’s a good man like his dad.” Indeed, Daniel assumes many of the household responsibilities, such as feeding the family’s animals, which are completed by only women in other families of Novel Creación. His father, Andrés, cares for the family’s garden and, only if Fernanda has a meeting at the cooperative’s headquarters, prepares his own food. Furthermore, Fernanda labels both men as ‘good’ for assuming duties previously associated with the female gender. The lives of Fernanda and Belinda demonstrate that the “process of full incorporation of women into the labor market, and into paid work, has important consequences for the family... Female bargaining power in the household increased

\(^{110}\) Castells, 423.

\(^{111}\) Ibid., 232.
In other words, because of their economic contributions, the women are able to redefine gendered divisions of labor. As demonstrated in chapter one, being a woman is economically advantageous within the market of fair trade. Because economic success in the rug market requires female participation, families can profit by allowing their female members to join Novel Creación. As a family’s economic success is now dependent on a certain level of female input, the women are able to leverage greater control over the allocation of fiscal resources.

**A Macro Viewpoint**

“There is, however, a particular world balance of power within which any analysis of culture, ideology, and socio-economic conditions has to be necessarily situated.” As Florencia Mallon argues in her study of the relationship between patriarchy and capitalism, “colonial debates on the status and welfare of women were never about women’s rights but about which legal or patriarchal entity was to exercise authority over women.” Such is the case with many studies that attempt to analyze gender roles in the context of globalization.

Viewed from a global perspective, Novel Creación’s attempt to restructure gender divisions is limited because, “in a sense,” the women are only choosing “between systems of hierarchy, colonial or ethnic/communal.” In other words,

“Changes brought about by (globalization give) some women greater access to education or other privileges or opened up new social or economic opportunities through the market...sometimes, the fissure between systems of rule allowed some personal autonomy for women. But, in many cases, colonialism (or neo-colonialism,

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112 Ibid., 232.
113 Mohanty, 198.
114 Mallon, 1994, 1509-1510.
115 Ibid., 1510.
in the case of globalization) simply added a new and invasive kind of domination to the old.”

Attempts to glorify or romanticize the women’s accomplishments must therefore be taken with a grain of salt. For instance, while the cooperative has been able to use fair trade to their economic advantage, they are being challenged by the neoliberalist system that aims to reduce trade barriers and wages in the ‘developing’ world. Forgeries of Zapotec rugs, the women told me, are now being produced in sweatshops in India for sale in the U.S. Despite their local advances in gender equity, the women are still subordinate to the neoliberalist economic theory that pushes the prices of their products down.

**Conclusion**

The women of Novel Creación are reshaping gender norms in the areas of education, marriage, and household responsibilities. In the case of Novel Creación, challenges to gender norms are not imposed on the community by western feminists, such as myself, but rather arise out of local social movements. “The feminist movement” therefore “displays very different shapes and orientations, depending upon the cultural, institutional, and political contexts in which it arises.”

In southern Mexico, this movement has been defined by the Neo-Zapatistas. In their “indigenous women’s petition,” they state, “we the indigenous campesina women ask for the immediate solution to our urgent needs...child-birth clinics...day-care centers...the materials necessary to raise chickens, rabbits, sheep and pigs...craft workshops...schools...where women can receive technical training.” As the Zapatista’s spokesman, Subcomandante Marcos, remarked, “for the women of (indigenous)

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116 Ibid., 1510.
117 Castells, 247.
Lower and Basement Mexico's everything is duplicated: the percentage of illiteracy, the subhuman living conditions, low salaries and marginalization. Their subordinate role within global and local contexts shaped the indigenous women's movement that has inspired women like those in Novel Creación.

Bibliography


Conclusion

Through economic, cultural, and social reforms, the women of Novel Creación have altered life in Teotitlán del Valle. This thesis explored each of these topics from a variety of theoretical lenses in order to analyze the process through which women are re-interpreting their identities and gaining power. It also demonstrated that the changes the cooperative has induced are not unidirectional, and so it gave voice to the members of the organization while acknowledging their differences.

On one hand, the women’s impact can be analyzed through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of capital, attempting to pinpoint how the women’s attempt to gain economic resources has resulted in their attainment of cultural and social assets. Chapter one first focused on economic capital, purporting that, through their involvement with the global market, the women of Novel Creación have gained financial influence in Teotitlán del Valle. The second section used the idea of cultural capital to show how they have used this power to purchase material possessions and to fund and engage in educational opportunities. The third section elaborated on the idea of social capital to show how the women’s economic and cultural capital have led local authorities to consider the women to be powerful political figures. In summary, chapter one demonstrated that, as a result of their rise to local power, the women of Novel Creación have modified local conceptions of feminine Zapotec identity.

The second chapter used subaltern theory to investigate how the rug market has shaped indigenous identity in Teotitlán. The first section described and analyzed the identity being reinterpreted and reinforced by multiple aspects of local governance in Teotitlán del Valle. This section also explored the idea that Novel Creación has impacted both conceptions of indigenous and female identity through its involvement with formal political structures.
Finally, chapter two demonstrated the role of Teotitlán del Valle within the broader web of indigenous social movements and changing international power relations.

The third chapter elaborated on the idea that the women have altered cultural norms by exploring notions of gender identity in Teotitlán. By describing the ways in which the cooperative has disputed gender norms (using the oldest generation as a benchmark), this chapter expanded upon what participating in the formal economic sector has meant for women in Teotitlán. Since “hierarchies such as those of gender are constructed or legitimized” through “multiple rather than single causes,”¹²⁰ “the category of women is constructed in a variety of political contexts that often exist simultaneously and overlaid on top of one another.”¹²¹ Therefore, this chapter focused on how gender is interpreted and re-interpreted by Novel Creación in the areas of education, marriage, and household responsibilities.

In discussing the role of the cooperative in the community of Teotitlán, is it worth reiterating the distinction between neoliberalist economics (‘modernization’) and the fair trade model employed by Novel Creación. Modernist scholars argue that ‘development,’ closely tied to the expansion of economic markets, offers a solution to global poverty. As this essay has shown, there is no cookie-cutter solution to the problems of gender inequality and ethnic marginalization. Furthermore, such attempts to impose western solutions homogenize women of the ‘developing’ world, thereby depriving them of their dignity and agency. These “women are assumed to be a coherent group of category prior to their entry into ‘the development process,’” which “assumes that all third-world women have similar problems

and needs.\textsuperscript{122} The case of Novel Creación demonstrates that empowerment through modernity is only successful when it takes into account local issues and histories (or, in this case, herstories). Modernization also negates the role that western governments have had in creating the system that rendered the community of Teotitlán marginalized. Rather than superimposing western values and norms, the social scientist, NGO, or government agency would do better to recognize and respect the grassroots efforts that are \textit{poco a poco} (little by little) improving the plight of Zapotec women on their own terms.

\textsuperscript{122} Mohanty, 206.
Bibliography


"Empezamos con la idea de promover a nuestra artesanía para vender directamente al consumidor a un precio justo."

"Al principio, ellos (las autoridades) se sorprendieron porque no esperaban tener este tipo de idea."

"Dijeron, ‘que bueno que están haciendo algo para el beneficio de la comunidad.’ Y estuvieron muy contentos y dijeron, ‘cualquier cosa, pueden contar con nosotros. Si necesitan ayuda o algo.’"

Support Group for Women’s Education

"tabú; es decir, los problemas existían, pero nadie los platicaba."

"Antes no sabía que la violación sexual puede ocurrir entre maridos. Pensaba que tuvieras que tener relaciones con tu esposo cuando él las deseaba."

"Antes, en el mercado, veía mujeres con sus caras cubiertas, porque sus esposos les habían golpeado. Pero ahora no se ve esta violencia física tanto."

"Todavía hay mucha violencia emocional y ya no hay la conciencia de que esta es violencia también."

"La subordinación, la timidez, el temor."

"Por la cultura las mujeres eran muy criticadas. Las juzgaban porque decían que no tenían quien las controlara porque no tenían un hombre en su casa. Las mujeres estaban haciendo lo que ellas querían, y decían que no teníamos respeto... Ellos decían que la mujer debe de estar en su casa, no salir a la calle, que sólo los hombres andaban en la calle, que andan en grupo, y que nosotros parecíamos hombres."

"Su pueblo es menos tradicional... la libertad que faltan la mayoría de las mujeres acá."

"Teníamos un poco de temor. Las primeras dos, tres veces, no opinamos, sólo escuchamos. Pero poco a poco fuimos perdiendo el miedo. Poco a poco la gente empezaron a aceptarnos, pero también otras mujeres escuchaban que íbamos, por sus esposos. Entonces habían otras mujeres que decían, ‘yo quiero ir a la junta. A qué horas ustedes se van, porque yo quiero ir.’ ¡Hasta ahora las mujeres sentamos juntas y casi las mujeres están en la mayor parte de las sillas!"

"De los 570 municipios en el estado de Oaxaca, fueron 418 los municipios que optaron por usos y costumbres."

"No es miembro sólo por derecho, sino que se debe ser de hecho. Todos los adultos tienen la obligación moral de ser parte del poder comunal, asistiendo a las asambleas generales."
"Elige a sus autoridades, discute y decide asuntos, genera acuerdos y mandatos."

En 1998 decidimos formalizar el grupo (Novel Creación), y fuimos para presentarnos con la autoridad municipal. El presidente en este tiempo era buena persona, se llama Renaldo González. Nos invitó a ir a la asamblea. Entonces fue cuando empezamos a participar, como grupo. La primera vez fue muy difícil porque estábamos muy nerviosas y teníamos miedo. Cuando llegamos ya había muchos hombres. Éramos ocho, y todos estaban viéndonos. Las primeras dos, tres veces, no opinamos, solo escuchamos. Pero poco a poco fuimos perdiendo el miedo. Poco a poco la gente empezaron a aceptarnos, pero también otras mujeres escuchaban que íbamos, por sus esposos. Entonces habían otras mujeres que decían, ‘yo quiero ir a la junta. A que horas ustedes se van, porque yo quiero ir.’ Hasta ahora las mujeres sentamos juntas y casi las mujeres están en la mayor parte de las sillas.

Podemos escuchar a nuestra mamá de acá porque siempre tiene que comentar en todo, y siempre habla fuerte.

Las mujeres ahora van a las asambleas, pero yo no, porque tengo mi padre y él va para mí. Solo las mujeres sin parientes hombres van.

No es miembro sólo por derecho, sino que se debe ser de hecho.

Es algo importante como cuando eligieron al comité de drenaje el mes pasado.

Mi esposo me dijo, ‘¿quieres ir?’ pero no quiero porque van hasta muy tarde y, para mi, muchas de las cosas que platican no son importantes.

Todos los adultos tienen la obligación civil de trabajar gratuitamente en obras comunitarias a través del tequío.

Principalmente, las mujeres creen que no tienen la esfuerzo física.

Las mujeres acá piensan que no pueden dar cargo en los comités. Como con el agua, creen que los miembros tienen que ir al monte si algo rompe, y entonces piensan que es muy pesado. Pero, como con el agua, es las mujeres quienes lo usan más, y el comité toma todas las decisiones importantes sobre quien puede usar el agua y cuando.

Porque así es el costumbre. Así es como manda el pueblo.

Las mujeres no cambian el sistema porque no creen en sí mismas.

Porque soy mujer. Mis padres eran pobres y además del trabajo de las mujeres es hacer atole, echar tortillas, hacer sopa.

Mi mamá dijo que tenía que aprender “la ocupación de una muchacha, que significaba echar tortillas y hacer la comida.”

Anteriormente, las mujeres no fueron a la secundaria.”
“Salí de la escuela después de la primaria. Mis media-hermanas eran chiquitas, y tenía que ayudar con ellos. Teníamos que comprar uniformes, cuadernos, lápices, todo para mis hermanos, y además teníamos que comprar comida para todos.”

―Todos van a casarse joven, y que las mujeres van a quedarse en casa y cuidar a los niños.‖

―Yo lo conoci hace muchos años a mi senior. El me robó, así se dice.‖

―Tengo 73. No. Tengo 72 porque mi senior tiene 73.‖

―Siguió adelante... perdonaron sus errores.‖

―Mi esposo e hijo me apoyan mucho. Tengo suerte porque la mayoría de las mujeres, cuando se casan, salen de la cooperativa porque no tienen el apoyo de sus familias.‖

―En este tiempo estaba trabajando en Tijuana, y le dije, ‘me gusta mi libertad. He visto como muchos esposos pegan a sus esposas y no les permiten salir sola.’ No quería una vida así entonces le dije que nunca querría casarme. Pero él me prometió que no ibamos a ser así.‖

―Si él me tratara mal, yo saldría. No lo aguantaría. Sé que puedo proveer por mi misma, y por Daniel también si necesitaría. Entonces Andrés nunca me dice que no puedo ir a Oaxaca con la cooperativa, o ir sola a visitar a Daniel en la escuela, porque él sabe que yo lo dejaría.‖

―Si hubiera casado con un hombre de Teotitlán, tendría que mudarse con la familia de él, donde no tendría tanta libertad.‖

―Salí en 2007, cuando me casé. En un matrimonio se respetan lo que dice los padres del esposo, especialmente en mi caso porque me mudé a su casa con ellos. Tienes que estar al orden de sus suegros. Me casé y todo se fue.‖

―Mi esposo me apoya; me dice, ‘si quieres regresar, tienes mi apoyo.’ Tenemos respeto mutuo. No tengo que pedir permiso de él, pero nos consultamos antes de tomar decisiones sobre nuestros días.‖

―No sé si quiero casarme. Aquí cuando uno ya está casado, es difícil seguir adelante. Aquí es muy diferente. Aquí los suegros opinan mucho. Si va a salir mucho, sus suegros la va a decir, ‘¿A dónde vas? ¿Por qué no estás en la casa?’‖

―No quiero quedarme en casa y cuidar a los niños.‖

―Set Presidenta requiere mucho trabajo. Si me casaría, saldría de la cooperativa porque me gustaría dedicarme al hogar, a cocinar y cuidar un jardín, y tal vez tener una vaca para leche.‖

―Me gustaría casarme, porque tengo miedo de que mi mamá va a morir, mis hermanas van a salir de Teotitlán, y voy a estar sola. Y de allí, ¿qué pasa si me pongo enferma o algo?‖

―Ahora puedes casarte con un hombre verdadero de Teotitlán!‖
“Los hombres de acá son muy machismos, y las mujeres también porque enseñan a los niños ser así.”

“Soy la ama de casa.”

“Estábamos criticados; la gente dijo, ‘¡como son mujeres, tienen que quedarse en casa!’”

“Los hombres en la calle y las mujeres en el mercado.”

“En las fiestas, las mujeres cocinan y sirven a los hombres. Luego comen separados.”

“Pienso que todos deben servirse a sí mismo y que deben sentarse juntos.”

“Nos gusta nuestra cultura, pero creemos que hay aspectos que deben cambiar.”

“La madre de Eduardo trabajaba fuera de su casa, entonces desde su niñez Eduardo había cocinado.”
Bibliography


Appendix A: Interview Questions

The following is a sample of the questions asked of each informant during interviews:

What is your name?

How old are you?

With whom do you live?

Do you have children or grandchildren?

How old were you when you got married?

To whom does your house belong (whose name is it in)?

Do you have electricity? When did you get it? Who decided to get it?

Do you have plumbing? When did you get it? Who decided to get it?

How many years of school did you attend? Why did you stop attending?

Have you always lived in Teotitlán?

For how long have you been involved in Vida Nueva?

Why did you decide to join Vida Nueva?

When and how did you learn to weave?

Can you walk me through what a typical day is like for you?

What do you think about the cooperative’s community projects?

Why do you think it’s important for the cooperative to focus on ecological projects?

What was your favorite project, and why?

Can you explain to me the process of deciding on and implementing the projects, for example, with the reforestation project?
Where do the resources come from to do the projects, and who benefits from them? For example, how many women received ecological stoves, how did you choose the recipients, and where did the money come from to construct them?

Has the environment (weather patterns) changed in recent years? How and why do you think that is?

What was the role of women like when you were little? How has it changed?

What chores are you responsible for around the house?

What types of plants do you cultivate? Who takes care of them? Who decides when to eat or sell them?

What kinds of animals do you have? Who takes care of them? Who decides when to eat or sell them?

What challenges have you faced since joining the cooperative?

What impact do you feel the cooperative has had on your family’s financial situation?

How much do you earn from participating in the cooperative?

What impact do you feel the cooperative has had on your marriage?

What impact do you feel the cooperative has had on your involvement with the community?

How are decisions made within the community? Within your household? Within the cooperative?

Have you ever been elected to community service? When, which post, why were you selected, and what was it like (your duties, your attitude towards it)?

Do you attend assemblies? If not, why? If yes, when did you start attending? How often do you attend?

Do you vote in national and state elections? If so, when did you start and why?
Appendix B: Vocabulary

Atole: drink made from corn

Canillos: bobbins

Cardar: to card wool

Cargo: community service, long-term projects

Comité: committee

Cuevita: religious site of Teotitlán

Guelaguetza: system of reciprocal exchanges of goods and services

Huilpe: type of dress

Mandil: apron

Manta: wool skirt worn by oldest generation or during ceremonies

Pescador: basket

Rebozo: shawl

Tapete: rug, tapestry

Telar: loom

Tequio: community service, short-term projects

Tortilla: food made from compressed corn
Appendix C: The Process of Making a Rug

The following was completed as reciprocity for allowing me to research the cooperative. The women described each step of making a rug to me in Spanish. I then translated it and printed it out. They now show this list to tourists as an educative tool. This project also served as an import way for me to document the division of labor within each household.

1. Buy the raw, dirty wool from nearby villages
2. Loosen the wool by pulling the fibers apart
3. Clean the wool in the village’s river to remove thorns and burs
4. Dry the wool by sunlight
5. Card the wool by combing it between two wood and metal brushes
6. Spin the wool into skeins of yarn on a hand-turned wheel
   a. Warp yarns: white, foundational and longitudinal
   b. Filling yarns: dyed and horizontal, inserted into the warp yarns using shuttles
7. Prepare the natural dyes:
   a. For yellows and oranges, travel to the Cerro mountain to find “musgo de roca” (rock moss) and other wild plants
   b. For browns, cultivate fruits such as “zapote negro” (sapodilla plum), “granada” (pomegranate), “limón” (lime) and “nuez” (nuts, of which the bark of the tree is used) in household gardens
   c. For blues and reds, purchase “anil” (indigo) and “cochinilla” (cochineal insects) from nearby villages
8. Collect firewood from the Cerro mountain
9. Wash the skeins of yarn
10. Boil the skeins in the dye over an open fire

11. Dry the skeins by sunlight

12. Wind the skeins onto shuttles

13. Raise the warp threads to form the shed, through which the filling threads can be inserted

14. Connect the warp threads to the loom and roll the warp threads around the loom

15. Create the design and select the appropriate colors

16. Weave the tapete

17. Cut the finished rug off of the loom

18. Clean the rug by hand to remove thorns and burs

19. Twist the fringed ends of the tapete

20. Sell the one-of-a-kind, hand-crafted tapete

*Depending on the design, each tapete can take from a week to three months to make*