

We Are the Face of Oaxaca: Testimony and Social Movements

CSWS-Funded Research Culminates in Innovative Book

by Lynn Stephen, Distinguished Professor of Arts and Sciences Director, Center for Latino/a and Latin American Studies, (CLLAS)

I am a woman born in Oaxaca of Zapotec and Mixtec blood. We Oaxacan women ask that a woman be treated with the same rights as a man. Our mission as women is to create, educate, communicate, and participate. That is why we are here occupying the state radio and T.V. station.... We are women who don't usually have a voice because we are brown, we are short, we are fat, and they think that we don't represent the people, but we do. We are the face of Oaxaca. ...It is too bad that the government doesn't recognize the greatness, the heart, and the valor of the women who are here. We are here because we want a free Mexico, a democratic Mexico, and we have had enough. ...They will have to take us out of here dead, but we are going to defend the TV station and radio. —Fidelia Vázquez, testifying inside the Corporación Oaxaqueña de Radio y Televisión (COR-TV), Oaxaca's public TV and radio station after women took it over on August 1, 2006.

The quote above comes from an interview I recorded in August 2006 as a result of a CSWS-funded research trip with the Américas RIG to forge links with women's organizations in Oaxaca, Mexico. Little did we know when we set out that we would arrive in the midst of one of the most significant social movements in recent memory in contemporary Mexico. Six years later while on sabbatical partially funded by a fellowship at the Center for U.S.–Mexican Studies at the University of California, San Diego, I completed a book titled *We are the Face of Oaxaca: Testimony and Social Movements*, forthcoming with Duke University Press (2013). It is Duke's first book with integral digital video and photographic



Women in San Agustín Atenango, Oaxaca working together to prepare a communal meal for a political rally.

content and will be published in paper and as an e-book with a website of accompanying digital materials directly accessible through links in the e-book. I am grateful to CSWS for funding the research and earlier website construction phases of this project and to the University of Oregon for partially funding my sabbatical year in 2011-2012.

The book centers on a social movement in Oaxaca, Mexico and the emergence in June 2006 of the Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca (Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca, APPO). APPO, a coalition of over 300 organizations, disrupted the usual functions of the Oaxaca state government for six months. It took over state radio and TV stations and began to construct a more inclusive and participatory political vision for the state, until the Mexican federal police force intervened. A complex mixture of movements—including those of teachers, indigenous peoples, women, students, peasants, and urban neighborhoods—had coexisted in Oaxaca for several decades and were the political soup out of which the Oaxacan social movement of 2006 emerged. The book is preceded by a digital ethnography website that was launched in 2009 with support from CSWS and the Center for Latino/a and Latin American Studies (CLLAS), titled *Making Rights a Reality*, located at <http://www.mraroaxaca.uoregon.edu/>.

I worked intensely with a team of students—including website designer Alina Padilla Miller, a graduate student in the UO School of Journalism and Communication (SOJC); Jesse Nichols, former UO undergraduate; translator Magali Morales, who produced the Spanish text on the website; Josué Gómez, a former graduate in anthropology at UO who helped with transla-

tion and subtitling; and my colleague Professor Gabriela Martínez (SOJC), who provided technical expertise, to put together the website.

After the website was launched, I continued to discuss it with the people who had participated in it and others who had reviewed it in Oaxaca. I received many ideas for how to improve and broaden the project. Since most of the participants were also interested in seeing a book produced as well, I concentrated on that project. The conversations and connections I made through the process of working with people on the website resulted in further suggestions for interviews and the video and audio recording of more testimonials I have used in the book.

During the summers of 2009, 2010, and 2011, I continued to interview and record testimonials. Most of these are not included in the website, but became important sources of insights and information for the book. I interviewed local business owners, people involved with the Catholic Church, teachers, artisans, participants in subsequent radio-station takeovers in Oaxaca and others active in creating new community radio stations. I also spoke with participants in barricades, youth activists, and academics. I ended up with a corpus of more than 80 audio/visual interviews with testimonials embedded in them.

As I moved into the third year of interviewing and recording testimonies, I realized that the form of providing testimony—of witnessing, of retelling events and experiences of 2006—was a visceral and emotional experience for everyone I talked with. The urgency with which everyone talked about the social movement and conflict of 2006 almost always resulted in long stretches of reflective narration and the recall of events, feelings, and emotions, which included

a strong identification with being “Oaxaqueño,” (Oaxacan—interpreted, of course, from many different perspectives and with multiple meanings. One of the most interesting results of the 2006 social movement was the unification of many different sectors of Oaxacan society under the political identity of “el pueblo de Oaxaca” (the Oaxacan people). The hybrid ethnic, class, and generational differences that came together in APPO and related movements created a new sense of who is Oaxaca, as reflected in the testimony of Fidelia which begins this chapter and became a kind of mini-mantra and analysis for the processes and experiences represented here.

As I immersed myself time and time again in the narratives, I was struck by the fundamental importance of testifying—not only for individuals but also for the social movement. This importance was evident in video-recordings of public events and radio broadcasts as well. The power of oral testimony was amplified not only emotionally for those who did the telling and listening, but also through its reproduction in multiple forms as it was recorded, broadcast, textualized, and then disseminated along multiple transmission channels. I was observing a form of knowledge production that drew from oral archives of knowledge and then reproduced them in conjunction with written and visual forms.

The chapter focused on women’s takeover of public media in Oaxaca and its subsequent impact is one of the most important ones in the book. “The Rights to Speak and Be Heard: Women’s Interpretations of Rights Discourses in Media Take-Overs,” documents the process by which several hundred women took over state and then commercial media (radio and television), opening up key cultural, political, and communication channels—literally and symbolically—that permitted new voices to be heard,



Lynn Stephen presenting research results in Oaxaca City.

new faces to be seen, and alternative models of governance and political participation to move temporarily into the mainstream. Through their experience running radio and television stations these women came to a gendered local vernacular of rights talk that became accessible to many other women and men in the city. The chapter also highlights the crucial security and information role played strategically by movement controlled radio as repression of the movement increased and terminated with occupation by federal police forces after six months.

Every Oaxacan was profoundly affected by the events of 2006. The social conflict revealed in stark terms the lack of rights (in practice) and political participation that the majority of Oaxacans had. It also revealed the potential power and strategic effectiveness of testimony and of the political identity forged around “el pueblo de Oaxaca.” The lasting legacy of the 2006 social movement can be found in the words of Fidelia: “We are brown, we are short, we are fat, and they don’t think that we represent the

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Latin American and Latino/a communities are connected by global economic and cultural processes. The Center for Latino/a and Latin American Studies (CLLAS) at the University of Oregon puts Latino/a and Latin American Studies in conversation with one another. CLLAS is a knowledge center dedicated to public access and excellence through the integration of teaching, research, community engagement, and dissemination. CLLAS is an integral part of the University of Oregon’s strategy to recruit, retain, and build alumni relations with a diverse and energized group of students, faculty, staff, parents, and families and to connect the university locally, nationally, and globally.

people, but we do. WE are the face of Oaxaca.” The Oaxacan social movement gave birth to a new set of political subjects—not only those who identify with the words of Fidelia, but others as well. These new political subjects, for example, include the middle-class entrepreneurs and business people who felt that they had to step up and participate in new ways in politics in Oaxaca. Probably the most significant transformations at the personal level happened to women and youth, who were central players during the most powerful periods of the 2006 movement and continue to be the motors of change in Oaxaca and in larger Mexico. ■

—Other books by Dr. Lynn Stephen include *The Story of PCUN and the Farmworker Movement in Oregon* (revised 2012); *Transborder Lives: Indigenous Oaxacans in Mexico, California, and Oregon* (Duke University Press, 2007); *Dissident Women: Gender and Cultural Politics in Chiapas* (coedited with Shannon Speed and Aída Hernández Castillo) (University of Texas Press, 2006), and *Zapotec Women: Gender, Class, and Ethnicity in Globalized Oaxaca* (Duke University Press, 2005).

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I’m interested in bringing to the forefront untold stories, that is, stories that are not so well known in mainstream society. I seek out stories that may be marginalized due to their lack of commercial appeal, or because the topic may be too controversial or hard to sell due to the nature of the story. It is important that people get exposed to other realities even if they are harsh, different, or controversial.

Q: What are some of the key factors in your decision to take the associate director position at CSWS?

GM: I am honored to take the associate directorship at CSWS. I have been involved with CSWS since I was an assistant professor, first as a member of the Americas Research Interest Group, and later as a member of the CSWS Executive Committee, on which I served for two consecutive terms. CSWS is a unique center where faculty from a wide variety of disciplines come together to share research interests concerning women and gender.

One of the most attractive things about this center for me is the way it serves as a stimulating space where one can learn from colleagues. I have been in various meetings where I learned different aspects about women and gender issues related to literature, philosophy, geography and other fields. I appreciate interdisciplinary work, and I find CSWS to be an ideal place for engaging in interdisciplinary research.

I believe that in an academic setting, media should be at the service of different disciplines. Media should bring to the core the various voices and diverse ways of seeing and interpreting the world that we study. CSWS is a place that will give me the opportunity to share more with colleagues from across campus as well as the chance to deepen my understanding of how research centers work internally and externally. I hope that my contribution during my time as associate director will further the already excellent work CSWS has been doing for nearly forty years. ■

—Annual Review editor Alice Evans spoke with Gabriela Martínez in June 2012.



Gabriela Martínez, documenting the DNA Lab of the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation (FAFG), which is dedicated to the exhumation of bodies and DNA testing to locate the remains of victims during the war (<http://www.fafg.org/Ingles/paginas/DNA.html> and <http://www.fafg.org/Ingles/paginas/FAFG.html>) / photo courtesy of Greg Krupa.