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WARRIOR WOMEN

CONTESTED UNDERSTANDINGS OF VIOLENCE
AND GENDER IN HIGHLAND MEXICO

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PhD in Social Anthropology
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Declaration

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I declare that, except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is entirely my own work, and that no part of it has been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

Catherine Whittaker

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Abstract

Based on 15 months of ethnographic research in Milpa Alta, a rural, southern municipality of Mexico City, this thesis focuses on local understandings and contestations surrounding “violence against Indigenous women”, while questioning the meaning of “violence”, “Indigeneity”, and “femininity,” and the relationship between these concepts. I argue for rethinking violence, as present interventions in Milpa Alta may contribute more to perpetuating than alleviating it.

Newly circulating discourses of human rights and women’s rights, and high numbers of femicide and sexual trafficking victims in the region, have made Milpaltenses aware of the issue of violence against women. Paradoxically, many acknowledged it to be widespread, while insisting that women and men are equally powerful: Local ideologies of work and love emphasise complementarity and interdependency in marriage. In practice, interdependent work and love contain within themselves potential for violence.

Instead of directly discussing “violence”, Milpaltenses often spoke of “order” and “chaos”: They interpreted certain acts as maintaining or changing embodied states and the social order. Violence was also often likened to love, as one may find expression in the other, and both engender transformation. Instead of viewing women as “victims”, a pejorative epithet, they were frequently lionized as “strong women”, “hard workers”, “strugglers”, and “warriors”, protecting their families and communities from all kinds of harm. Historically, women have fought alongside their men in the communal struggle to defend the local forest against the interests of mining companies and paper factories.

In sum, my analysis of local discourse, life history interviews, historical and mythic narratives, religious practice, and gendered work shows that violence against Milpaltense women can neither be understood in terms of “culturally legitimate violence”, nor in terms of patriarchal oppression alone. Thus, anti-violence strategies promoting an individualist notion of women’s rights are not only inefficient, but also risk socially isolating the women accepting this approach. I conclude that intervening to save women from “cultural violence” and imposing a particular understanding of violence, is ineffective. Development initiatives would be more likely to meet women’s needs if they built on local understandings, which link love and violence, rather than oppose these.

Lay Summary

Based on 15 months of immersive qualitative research in Milpa Alta, a rural, southern municipality of Mexico City, this thesis investigates what “violence against Indigenous women” means for local people. I argue for rethinking violence, as present anti-violence interventions in Milpa Alta may contribute more to perpetuating than alleviating it.

Milpaltenses are aware of the issue of violence against women, as they have been exposed to the ideas of human rights and women’s rights, and are aware of high numbers of murdered and sexual trafficked women in the region. Many acknowledged violence against women to be widespread, while also insisting that women and men are equally powerful. While they often idealised interdependence in marriage, in practice, it is possible for interdependency to turn violent.

Instead of directly discussing “violence”, Milpaltenses often spoke of “order” and “chaos”: They interpreted certain acts as maintaining or changing how people feel and act, and society more broadly. Violence was also often compared to love, as one may find expression in the other, and both have the power to change people. Women were frequently praised as “strong women”, “hard workers”, “strugglers”, and “warriors”, protecting their families and communities from all kinds of harm. Historically, women have fought alongside their men to defend the local forest against the interests of mining companies and paper factories.

In sum, my study of local conversations, life history interviews, historical and mythic stories, religious practice, and gendered work shows that violence against Milpaltense women can neither be understood in terms of “cultural violence”, nor in terms of “women’s oppression” alone. I conclude that intervening to “save” women and imposing a particular understanding of violence on Milpaltenses is ineffective. In fact, competing ideas about how men and women should relate to each other are themselves giving rise to conflict, and risk worsening some women’s situation. Future initiatives would be more likely to reach women and meet their needs if they built on local understandings, which link love and violence, instead of presenting these as mutually exclusive.

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Introduction

*[... T]he postcolonial woman intellectual asks the question of simple semiosis –
What does this mean? – and begins to plot a history.*

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak – “Can the Subaltern Speak?”

It was around 9 pm on a seemingly inexorable, bumpy bus ride to Mexico City centre from its southern, mountainous outskirts on the Milpa Alta-Tasqueña line. Three rows in front of me, a curly-haired girl in a pink sweatshirt, perhaps seven years old, was wrestling with what I presumed to be her father, who was seated behind her. He looked to be in his late twenties and wore a black leather jacket. She gleefully threw all her energy into the fight, tousling his short, gelled hair, also pulling it. When he mock-slapped the girl and took her head between his hands, lightly pressing his thumbs against her eyes, this only augmented her exhilaration as she continued to fight back, while the putative mother next to her, also wearing pink, kept her eyes firmly on the road ahead with an air of ennui. She was the first of the three to get up and alight in Xochimilco. I felt like I was the only person on the bus to take notice, and to feel troubled.

Is the ability to perceive certain kinds of violence cultural? When is it violence or only “rough play”? What kind of subjectivities are being produced in violent practices and discourses about violence? Some would say an act is only violent when there is a lack of consent, but consent is often complicated: For instance, one could argue that children are unable to give informed consent. It would appear that the scene on the bus falls into a “grey area”, located somewhere on a continuum of violence. Yet could it be something else entirely? The girl’s pleasure in fighting troubles the portrayal of women and girls as passive victims of violence in developing countries. As I will describe later, this image was troubled even more by my encounters with the *guerreras*, the “warrior women”, of Milpa Alta, a rural municipality in the south of Mexico City. How do we address violences that do not necessarily express oppression nor wreak destruction but instead express love and engender transformation? Are we equipped to imagine a loving violence without reducing

it to a matter of dysfunctionality or power? Questioning dominant narratives about violence, I suggest, aids us in envisioning more locally sensitive, effective alternatives to it.

In this thesis, I will explore alternative ways of imagining violence and its relation to gender and Indigeneity¹ by examining local understandings of violence against Indigenous women. As recent controversies around sexual harassment in the wake of the #MeToo movement show, men and women who oppose violence against women in principle may simultaneously reject the definitions of violence and victimhood espoused by other members of their society. What is at stake in such debates is not only women's wellbeing or social harmony, but people's lifeworlds: Violence may act as a symbolic practice through which people understand themselves and others (High 2015: 3). For example, labelling violence against women as "cultural violence" has been politically weaponised to justify British colonialism in India (Merry 2009: 26; Spivak 1988) and the US war against the Taliban on the grounds of liberating women after the 11 September 2001 attacks (Abu-Lughod 2013). Moreover, the current NGO discourse on "female genital mutilation" conjures images of abject barbarity and physical horror, which contrasts with the way many circumcised Somali women themselves perceive this practice (Lowe 2015: 151). Similarly, the current debate on violence against women in Mexico is split between those decrying cultural violence (Rojas Blanco 2010) and those presenting a more complicated picture, showing that some Indigenous women maintain their cultural identity while creating new traditions in the place of "bad customs" (Hernández, Stephen, and Speed 2006; Raby 2012). A widely held view among Indigenous feminist activists in the Americas is that "colonization has involved their removal from positions of power, the replacement of traditional gender roles with Western patriarchal practices, the exertion of colonial control over Indigenous communities through the management of women's bodies, and sexual violence" (Huhndorf and Suzack 2010: 1). Note that, in the present thesis, "Indigenous" refers to a shared experience of colonialist and racist violence, which intersects with other axes of oppression and "cut[s] across boundaries of nation, language, and culture" (ibid.).

¹ My capitalisation of "Indigeneity" aims to denaturalise the category and challenge essentialist understandings and social injustices associated with it. As I will clarify in Chapters 1 and 2, "Indigenous" is a concept with multiple meanings.

A key problem with the notion of “cultural violence” is that it is often used in a racist manner in everyday discourse, evoking exotic, faraway “savage” practices. It has also been used as an analytic term in the social sciences to describe “the culturally embedded practice and assumption of domination over women in virtually all societies, and the general acceptance of violence as a means of maintaining that control, even of defending one’s masculinity” (Bunch 2015: xv). In other words, “cultural violence” is either used to localise and exoticise violence against women, or to portray violence against women as a universal phenomenon, which is supported by cultural attitudes, and may have culturally specific forms of expression. Illustrating the latter definition, Merry states that “gender violence in the USA tends to be male battering of women in intimate, romantic relationships, while in China an important part of gender violence is battering of elderly parents and children, reflecting the different patterns of family life” (2009: 20). For Merry, anthropological studies of violence against women should take a comparative, relativizing approach, but this view has been contested: “The relationship between feminism and respect for cultural difference is a difficult one, constantly subject to debate and renegotiation” (ibid.: 16).

Thus, I consider violence against Indigenous women to be a fruitful ground for analysing the most pressing, unresolved issues in the study of violence. In doing so, I contradict the notion that studies of violence against Indigenous women constitute narrow case studies, which has led to their disciplinary ghettoization (Huhndorf and Suzack 2010: 1-2; cf. Strathern 1987). Most current studies of violence focus on highly visible forms of violence and victimhood, such as war, extreme poverty, rape, genital circumcision, activist movements, genocide, and humanitarian disasters (e.g. Warren 2015; Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004; Das et al. 2000; Dobash and Dobash 1998; Speed et al. 2006; Hinton 2002; Farmer 2004). The way these topics have been associated suggests the persistence of an underlying assumption that “contestably rendering physical hurt (i.e. violence) has cross-cultural validity” (Riches 1986: 295). Other kinds of violence, such as harassment, are often deemed too subtle or subjective for comparative study and remain insufficiently addressed in consequence (Merry and Coutin 2014: 12). I will argue, on the contrary, that violence against Indigenous women is an excellent starting point for rethinking violence.

Following Mohanty, I situate my “analytic anchor in the lives of marginalized communities of women [because this] provides the most inclusive paradigm for thinking about social justice” (2002: 510). My fieldwork among Nahuatl speakers and other descendants of the Aztecs² focused on several women-led cultural production groups, including back-strap-loom weavers and shaman’s apprentices. By paying attention to local cosmologies, practices, discourses, and imaginations, as well as their gendered, generational, and other dimensions, I looked at what makes violence against women conceptually troubling in this postcolonial context. Can the issue be reduced to one of power or of relationality? Does it make sense to speak of “gender violence”, “cultural violence”, and “victims”, or would it be more productive to frame the described phenomena differently in specific contexts? Unlike most previous studies of violence against Indigenous women in Mexico, which have focused on organised women’s movements (Speed et al. 2006; Hernández 2001, 2008; Bastian Duarte 2011, 2012; González Montes 2007; Sierra 2004; Mejía 2010), this dissertation brings ordinary women’s and men’s voices, imaginations and experiences to the fore (for a similar approach, see Raby 2012, 2015). I will not exhaustively address the complex issue of how gender violence is produced, as this would have required a diachronic analysis of many economic, political, and social factors beyond the scope of the present study. My main object of study is the conceptualisation of violence against Indigenous women and its socio-cultural and experiential significance. In the following, I will justify my research focus ethnographically and theoretically, and then introduce Milpa Alta and my main interlocutors there, after which I will describe my methodological and ethical approach. I will also provide an overview of the chapters.

LEONA’S PARADOX

² I use the term “Aztec” advisedly, even though it is not the name Milpaltenses’ ancestors would have used for themselves. “Mexica,” as an alternative term, excludes the other ethnic groups that constituted the Aztec empire’s leadership and subjects (Maestri 2017). Some Milpaltenses say that their ancestors include not only Mexica, but also Chichimecs (an umbrella term for nomadic peoples of the Valley of Mexico) and Toltecs (see also Gomezcézar 2005: 67). Others say their ancestors were “Aztecs”, influenced by the classic ethnographies by Horcasitas (1979) and van Zantwijk (1960).

Just before the incident on the bus, I had conducted an illuminating three-hour interview with Leona, having first met her the weekend before, when I had slept at her house. At 64 years of age, she had a sweet, but weathered face and fulfilled the visual stereotype of Nahua femininity in this area, being no taller than 1,60 metres, and wearing a long braid and a chequered apron-dress. A large part of the interview covered her life story. She was a renowned teller of *zazamiltin* (stories) in Nahuatl and Spanish, who loved watching *lucha libre* (Mexican wrestling), and had worked all her life: As a child, she helped her family work the fields, so she only attended school from ages 14 to 17, at which point she met her husband and married. Beyond taking care of her household, her husband, and her children, she continued working in the family's *nopal* (edible prickly pear cactus) and corn fields, weaving, as well as selling food. In more recent years, she had also been working as a healer and *temazcalera*, bathing customers in the traditional dome-shaped *temazcal*-sweat lodge, and lamented feeling her strength waning, struggling to do as much work as in younger years. Yet she would not so much as complain of a headache, as she did not wish to cause her children worry. To stay healthy, she cultivated an attitude of gratitude: "I give myself space in the morning and when I go to bed, I'm alone and I thank myself, I thank my little feet [...] I give thanks to God who takes care of my children, of humanity, and who allows me to be here. This is my way of thinking. If I can learn something, then, it is His call, I am more than willing." She explained that when she did not want to get up in the mornings as a girl, her father had taught her to think of hard work not as a chore, but as play. When we spoke about changing values in younger women, she said,

I do not agree that there is a need for the government to help. Now there are programs to help single mothers, and women have no respect. [...] I don't like it. I say that we must force men to be with one, forcing the woman to bear the man. As my father used to tell me, right? The children come from two, not from one.

So I asked her what a woman should do if her husband starts drinking and becomes violent. At this, the otherwise forthright Leona hesitated, tears welling up, then spoke firmly:

I went through this. No doubt about that. My father told me, and I still remember, he told me when he arrived and I told him I wanted to separate: "You chose him (*Tú te lo buscastes*). But for a man to change, it depends on

the woman. Not on the man. [...] The woman is more intelligent than the man. Put your brain to work. Do not even tell me you have a problem. Fix your problem. After a while you will be with him. *Coraje* (rage) is from the waist up. And the *contento* (contentment, happiness) is from the waist down.”

Leona nodded: “Very strong, very real. Note his wisdom. A *man* was advising me. It was not my mother; it was my father.” She continued:

Later on he told me, “I do not like you wailing, *mijita* (my dear daughter)³. Now it is not that there is no remedy. [...] For this to work, have you seen the *animalitos* (dear animals) that work the fields? When they are happy, [...] the two animals take the furrow as far as you want. But both of them. If one wants to pull it on his own, it’s hard for him. And it’s true. If two go, it’s less heavy. If you go alone, you’ll get there, but it’s not the same. It’s heavier. [...]” And I, then, began to live by comparisons, by sayings, by facts. That’s how it is. And then he told me another one, my dad: “Look now. [...] *Trabaja, guarda, y piensa* – work, watch, and think. These are three things that will help you. What are you going to do tomorrow? How are you going to do it? And if your partner does not want to, you do it. [...] I will give you an inheritance: my sayings - if you want to take them. If you do not want to take them, it’s going to be your problem. [...] You know what’s good, you know what’s bad. [...] I’ll tell you another saying: If you want to have a husband, I’ll tell you: Do you want to have a handsome man? Dress him very well. Do you want to have a drunk man? Hand him the bottle. Do you want to have a womanizing man? Make no demands, let him go out. Do you want to have a husband? Treat him well: feed him, teach him to work, put up with him. [...] There are limits. You already lived with me; I drank.”

Leona says she managed to improve her situation through sacrifice and dedication to her marriage, leading her family by example. Her husband no longer drinks, but they still argue. “Everyone has to help me. Everything that works in the family isn’t the man, it’s the woman.” She said these are virtues that she learnt from her mother, whom she loved

³ Translation note: in Nahuatlised Mexican Spanish, *-ito/-ita* is often used not as a diminutive, but as a reverential suffix, in analogy to the suffix *-tzin* in Nahuatl.

dearly, “But for advice, I received more from my father than my mother. And I still draw on it.”

Over the course of my research, I heard many stories like Leona’s, presenting me with the central paradox of this thesis: Newly circulating discourses of human rights and women’s rights, as well as high numbers of femicide and sexual trafficking victims in the region, have made Milpaltenses aware of the issue of violence against women, which they acknowledge to be widespread, or even to have experienced themselves, and yet many insist on describing women and men as equally powerful. Often violence against women is blamed on cultural change, or brought into connection with alcoholism⁴ and cartel violence.⁵ Local culture, on the other hand, is viewed as promoting gender complementarity and interdependence, according to which both genders, though different, are equally valued and fight as equals.

Situating violence

The “father of anthropology”, Franz Boas, observed that “civilization is not something absolute, but [...] is relative, and [...] our ideas and conceptions are true only so far as our civilization goes” (1887: 589, quoted by Stocking 1982: 13). Following his students’ popularisation of his ideas (Mead 1928; Benedict 1934) and Evans-Pritchard’s (1937) much-lauded ethnography of witchcraft among Sudanese Azande people, many anthropologists have navigated morally troubling waters by relativizing.⁶ According to Graeber and Sahlins, cultural relativism

consists of the provisional suspension of our own moral judgments or valuations of other people’s practices in order to place them as positional

⁴ Rapid language death and cultural change has been linked to high suicide rates among Indigenous peoples, symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, and ill health in general (e.g. Ball and Moselle 2013; Chandler and Lalonde 2008). In Nahuatl-speaking communities, the rise of Spanish and decline of Nahuatl coincided with wider cultural transformations, and often also with social problems, such as alcoholism (Hill and Hill 1986).

⁵ For a nuanced picture of narcotrafficking and violence in the US-Mexican borderlands, see Muehlmann (2014).

⁶ Note that cultural relativism’s roots reach even further, as the 18th-century German philosopher J. G. Herder attributed a *Volksgeist*, a unique essence, to every nation (Haller 2005: 35).

values in the cultural and historical contexts that gave rise to them. The issue is what these practices mean, how they came about, and what their effects are for the people concerned, not what they are or are worth in our terms (2017: 16-17).

Yet Liisa Malkki (2007) asserts that the purpose of ethnography is to produce “situated knowledges” (Haraway 1988), which is somewhat different. While “cultural relativism” hinges on the assumption of a difference between “self” and “other”⁷, “situated knowledges” do not: “The knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and therefore able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another” (ibid.: 586).⁸ Following this approach, I am interested in seeing and conversing with Leona, rather than in explaining her views in distinction from mine. The effect is not to disprove dominant narratives, such as claims of patriarchal structures, but to complicate these, as it emphasises the fluid, dynamic, historically contingent processes of culture-making, allowing for the redefinition of identities within it (cf. International Indigenous Women’s Forum 2007: 2). In this exchange, I open my own moral views up to equal scrutiny as hers, as well as to the possibility of their transformation, and invite readers to follow suit.

In her words, Leona’s life is defined by virtuously working for her family. Previous ethnographers have observed that in the Nahuatl-speaking world, power and gender roles are symbolically articulated and negotiated in the local concept of “work” (Nahuatl: *tequitl*), which is central to local concepts of self and the cosmos (Good 2005, 2015a), and comprises all kinds of socially valued activities (Chamoux 1992), which for women include weaving and cooking (Adapon 2008). In Milpa Alta, the gendered division of labour is enacted at local feast preparations, where complementarity and interdependence is emphasised, and any commands are met with protest – differentiated roles do not equal hierarchy (Scott 1988). As in the Sierra Norte of Puebla, marriage is viewed as a relationship in which husband and wife work “as one”, love each other, and share

⁷ The dangers of trafficking in Us-Them distinctions are apparent in the context of land claims: Povinelli (2002) showed that liberal multiculturalist policies do not grant Aboriginal people in Northwest-Australia true autonomy but instead impose impossible standards of authenticity.

⁸ Arguably, a precursor of this approach can be found in Powdermaker’s beautifully reflexive and rigorously empirical *Stranger and Friend*, where she wrote of the anthropological necessity of combining “psychological mobility” with “a sense of compassion and of common humanity” (1967: 291).

happiness (Taggart 2007). Similarly, many ethnographies of Latin American peasant economies have shown that, even today, the gendered division of labour is often a necessity for survival, so that marriage is about much more than sexual and personal satisfaction, but also about generating food, and indeed about generating “society” (Mayblin 2010; van Vleet 2008; Woortman and Woortman 1997; Smith 1984; Harris 1978). To sustain this reproductive order, husbands are often said to have the duty of disciplining their wives if they do not fulfil their marital obligations (Alberti 2004) – a view which some older Milpaltenses share. However, for a younger family member or unrelated male to discipline a woman would be considered grave misconduct. (I will discuss discipline in relation to other forms of violence in Chapter 3.)

When I asked Leona about domestic violence, she understood my framing of the issue, and said that she had initially considered separating from her husband to protect her individual needs. But much like my kinship tutor taught me to think of violence as a gendered issue at university, Leona’s father had taught her to think about this as an issue of shared work and interdependency: Husband and wife need each other to get the work done which allows the family as a whole to survive and thrive. Similarly, husband and wife depend on each other to enact their complementary roles correctly, by reminding, coaxing, and, controlling each other. Accordingly, her father argued that the troubles in her marriage had emerged from a lack of marital work on Leona’s part, thus assigning her joint responsibility for her husband’s misconduct.

Her father’s speech was not only meant as advice, but is also as an “inheritance”, highlighting its value and its connection to a broader cultural tradition. In the way this speech transformed Leona’s attitude towards her marriage, I am reminded of what Magazine (2011), who worked with another community in Mexico City’s highland outskirts, has termed “active subjectivity”, denoting that interdependency requires people to activate each other’s pleasure (*placer, contento* or *gusto*) or willingness (*querer*⁹, *estar dispuesto*, or *voluntad*) to perform certain actions. Inspired by Strathern’s (1988) classic study of personhood in a Melanesian gift economy, Magazine demonstrates the need to separate producer, actor, and action in highland Mexican communities, where it is not impossible, but considered highly immoral, to act on one’s own, rather than enacting one’s need of, and indebtedness to, other people. Thus, questioning the idea that “persons are naturally

⁹ In another meaning, *querer* also denotes “love.”

endowed with the desire and ability to act”, or of “parents instilling subjectivity in their children”, Magazine argues that “the family is a site of continuous production of active subjectivity in each other” (2011: 76), in much the same way as communal feasts continuously produce active subjectivity in the community as a whole. This analogy is unsurprising: Studies of Nahua cosmology in various parts of Mexico have found that the human body mirrors the universe in the same way as the family mirrors the community (Good 2015a). These studies, however, occasionally forget to distinguish such symbolic representations from more troubled lived realities, presenting an idealized picture.

Leona’s father’s emphasis on both *coraje* and *contento* suggests an ongoing need to balance conflicting emotions, not to neutralize them, but to keep things going in the marriage. In this sense, Leona’s confident assertion that she continues to argue with her husband is not signaling dysfunctionality, but vitality. Her father’s comment that “The woman is more intelligent than the man,” suggests men and women are not equal partners in all respects, but that it is considered proportionate for women to carry a greater intellectual burden than their husbands. Shaylih Muehlmann documented similar statements among Cucapá people near the US-Mexican border: “Men in particular stressed that women were equal to them but that they are ‘smarter’, ‘more capable’, and ‘more valuable’ than men – a biocultural inequality that underwrites their superiority. [...] And women’s responsibilities ‘naturally’ far outnumbered those of men” (2013: 140). Judith Friedlander’s ethnography of Nahua identity in Hueyapan, Morelos, also includes a detailed woman’s life history of using “creativity and wit to protect her family and give them enough to eat, while preserving her own reputation as an honourable woman” (2006: 6).

This discourse of female superiority suggests that what I would intuitively identify as domestic violence and exploitation need not correlate with a lack of power. Leona emphasized that she was not a passive victim of her husband’s, but that she had a choice to either selfishly leave at the cost of her children’s and husband’s wellbeing, or to virtuously work on changing her husband’s conduct for the good of her whole family. In choosing the latter option, she drew on received knowledge, her faith, and her own observations. She described the hard work she did and continues to do for her family both as a sacrifice and as play, as she found joy and satisfaction in her achievements and trained ability to endure.

Throughout my research, both my male and female interlocutors frequently characterised the Milpaltense woman as a *mujer fuerte*, a strong woman, highlighting women's hard work, wisdom, and virtue. At first, it seemed contradictory to me that people would agree that violence against women is a common problem in Milpa Alta, and, in the same breath, exalt the power and value of Milpaltense women. Leona's story helped me to see that local understandings of work and gender as well as contesting cosmologies are key to making sense of these contradictions. As I will discuss later in the thesis, historically, women have fought alongside their men in the communal struggle (*lucha communal*) to defend the local forest against the interests of mining companies and paper factories. As a result, many Milpaltense women insisted that they were not interested in women's rights, but in the wellbeing of the whole community¹⁰.

ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

The ethnographies of Indigenous Mexican women's lifeworlds cited above point to particular sociocultural connections between marital interdependence, gender ideology, and the prevalence of violence against women. As Merry notes, though violence "seems to be a straightforward category of injury, pain, and death, it is very much shaped by cultural meanings" (2009: 4). For example, Greenberg's (1989) cultural approach to explaining high homicide rates in an Indigenous Oaxacan village combined the study of local narratives about violence with a consideration of historical economic, religious, and political transformations. Thus, the literature on violence and culture is vast and continually growing (see Warren 2015, Whitehead 2004a, Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004, and Schmidt and Schröder 2001 for general overviews), particularly in Mexican anthropology (e.g., Mora 2017; Castro 2015; Hernández 2015; Sierra, Hernández, and Sieder 2013; Reguillo 2012; Ferrándiz and Feixa 2004; Sánchez 1998). However, only after the Vietnam War and the Cold War did violence advance to the status of a disciplinary subfield, replacing an earlier focus on conflict, such as Gluckman's (1956) analysis of feuds and Lewis's (1961) "culture of poverty" studies, in which he blamed broken homes

¹⁰ See Speed 2006 for a similar discourse in Chiapas.

rather than broken systems for violence and poverty (see Stack 1974, Bourgois 1995, and Nordstrom 2004 for critiques).

Writing against universalising theories of violence that reduced it to biological predisposition (Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1979), Riches' (1986) edited volume on *The Anthropology of Violence* took stock of the emergent study of violence as a sociocultural institution. Riches' claim that "social and cultural factors, together with ecological setting are the chief factors influencing the type and frequency of violence in any social situation" (1986: 23) has been complicated by more recent analyses. Starn, lamenting omissions of highly visible forms of violence in anthropological writing, such as 1980s Maoist terror in Peru and the extreme poverty driving it, warned of disciplinary blinkering: "[Andeanists'] stress on ecological adaptations and sophisticated symbolism had as a consequence a tendency to minimise the full extent of the suffering across the countryside" (2004: 399). Anthropologists have since published a series of milestone publications on political violence (Mamdani 2002; Lutz 2002; Hinton 2002; Sluka 2000; Nordstrom and Robben 1995), as well as suffering (Mookherjee 2015; Mulla 2014; Das 2007; Farmer 2004; Kleinman, Das, and Lock 1997; Scheper-Hughes 1992; Scarry 1985).

While many of my interlocutors in Milpa Alta highlighted a connection between violence and love, the role of emotion has been far more contentious in the anthropology of violence. Some authors, like myself, have afforded affect an important place in their ethnographies of violence, whereas others chose to exclude it from their analyses. For example, Evans-Pritchard (1937) argued that Azande witchcraft was motivated by hatred for another person. While the victim slept, the witch would employ their psychic powers to steal their soul and eat it. Thus, witchcraft was an invisible practice of violence which explained bad things that happened to people which could not be attributed to human error. Similarly, Rosaldo (1993) described Ilongot headhunting as a ritual to focus the grief and rage resulting from loss away from those close to the headhunter. Taussig (1987) argued for finding a productive balance between the magical and the real, the affective and the objective. Conversely, Foucault, whose notions of governmentality, bio-power, and knowledge-power animate a wide literature on violence (e.g. Wies 2015; Smith-Oka 2013; Graeber 2012; Ticktin 2011; Mbembe 2003; Feldman 1991), sought to avoid psychological reductionism by emphasizing discourse (cit. in Hook 2011: 108). Lévi-Strauss once remarked that focusing on the "field of affectivity" was "naïve" and devoid

of explanatory force, as anything might potentially be explained in terms of a “vague” emotive reaction (1974: 207). Accordingly, one of his most famous students, Clastres (1994), framed his analysis of warfare among Amazonian people in structural terms, arguing that it served to maintain the autonomy of small groups and to prevent state formation. He concluded that, to the Guayaki of Paraguay, violence was a positive, rather than a negative, social force. Other “unemotional” structuralist-instrumentalist theories of violence include Bloch (1992), for whom violence creates the transcendental, and Sahlins (1972), who regarded violence as a form of “negative” reciprocity within broader exchange relationships.

Departing from narrow instrumentalist approaches, Whitehead (2004b) argued that violence may have sociopoetic effects: “Violent actions, no less than any other kind of behavioural expression, are deeply infused with cultural meaning and are the moment for individual agency within historically embedded patterns of behavior” (2004: 9). In highlighting the creative potential of violence, Whitehead drew on a long tradition of military theorists “from Sun-Tzu to Clausewitz” as well as Amazonian anthropology (Lévi-Strauss 1943; Viveiros de Castro 1992; Fausto 2000), in which forms of violence emerge “as important forms of cultural expression in their own right, not just as epiphenomena of ‘deeper’ structural processes. In other words, war is a ritual performance as much as it is an artefact of social structures and their symbolisation” (2004b: 70-71). Criticising this stance, Graeber claimed that extreme violence ceases to be communicative – which seems to assume there are no witnesses or mourners (2012: 116). More persuasively, he added that even when there is, in the perpetrator’s reasoning, a clear message being conveyed, the victim may perceive contradictions and feel confusion (ibid.: 124). Ultimately, the debate on the putative “meaningfulness” of violence showed only modest interest in the role of emotion.

Most recently, anthropologists of violence have replaced the focus on structure with foci on the body as a privileged site of symbolic inscription, bringing emotion back under analytical scrutiny, but mainly in terms of suffering (Das 2007, 1990; Wacquant 2004; Das et al. 2000; Boddy 1998; Kleinman et al. 1997; Daniel 1996). They also turned to “the dynamics of continually interacting and transforming formations” (Warren 2015: 122), which trouble the distinction between war and peace by looking at topics such as truth and reconciliation processes (Theidon 2013), escalation and de-escalation (Elvert,

Feuchtwang, and Neubert 1999), human trafficking (Petillo 2015; Warren 2012), and social suffering (Parson 2013; Garcia 2010; Das 2007; Moser and McIlwaine 2004). The blurring of victim/victimizer dichotomies in these ethnographies contradicts the classic tripartite model of violence that distinguishes predator, victim, and audience proposed by Riches (1986), and revived by Stewart and Strathern (2002).

In sum, the anthropological study of violence may be divided into structuralist, instrumentalist, symbolic, poetic and processual approaches as well as power-, cosmology-, subjectivity-, and gender-focused approaches. I contend that basing anthropological inquiry “on the lives and knowledge priorities of subjects” (TallBear 2014) requires an engagement both with structures of violence in the widest sense and with embodied experience and emotion beyond suffering. For instance, Nash (2002) interpreted Indigenous men’s violence against women as an expression of rage over the dual threat of losing control over the subsistence economy and over women who were increasingly working in low-paid assembly work away from home. Many Indigenous subsistence economies collapsed after 1994, the year of the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, which grew into a national Indigenous rights movement, and the year of a currency collapse when the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) took effect (Good 2011: 43).

Emotions, such as rage, translate the excessive, embodied intensities of affect into a narrative, socio-culturally meaningful form (Massumi 1996: 221), drawing from “open-ended and often unrecognized chains of semiotic associations,” as is the case with communication via GIFs, which allude to scenes from popular culture with high recognition value (Newell 2018: 1). Thus, emotion is highly meaningful and generative of meaning, but inherently lacks a fully chartable structure. If violence is commonly entangled with emotion, fantasies, and desires, it inevitably accrues “a surplus of meaning” (Aretxaga 2000: 46). In light of the great variety of ways violence has been addressed within the discipline, as well as its intimate emotional entanglements, most anthropologists of violence agree that a universal definition of violence is impossible (Das 2008: 284).

Therefore, I have adopted an inductive approach to understanding violence against Indigenous women. Moreover, my concern is not only with the conceptualisation of violence, but also with the practical effects of violence concepts and practices of meaning-making surrounding them (cf. Whitehead 2004a: 11-13). In my writing, I aim to

shed light not only on the “thick description” of ordinary situations, patterns, and “symbolic webs of meaning”, but also on the “emotional force” of certain events, which may not require symbolic thickness to be important, as well as recording that which lies beyond recognisable meaning (Rosaldo 1993: 2). In the following, I will expand on the three subfields in the anthropology of violence that inform my approach most strongly: violence against women, structural violence, and the cosmology of violence. I will also briefly comment on the study of gendered subjectivities. As with emotion, these foci complicate facile assignments of blame and innocence.

Evolving approaches to violence against women

I privilege the term “violence against women” over “gender violence” in this thesis because I primarily worked with women and accordingly have less data on the gendered violences affecting males and non-binary people. In anthropological inquiry, the term “gender-based violence” is currently the most popular, in order to acknowledge, as I do, that women are not the sole victims of gendered violences and because it is the term favoured in major international documents, such as the 1995 outcome document of the Beijing World Conference for women, convened by the UN (Merry 2009: 28). Similarly, the related term “gender violence” emerged via feminist activist positionalities within anthropology in the 1990s, when it “was defined as an important human rights violation for the first time” (ibid.: 1). Thus, the idea of having an umbrella term for various kinds of gendered violences, “as a broad issue reflecting male-female power dynamics and gender constructions that should be altered across the globe, [...] is a new approach resulting from the international interaction made possible by global networking among feminists since the 1970s” (Bunch 2015: xiii). “Violence against women” also continues to be the favoured term among feminist activists, and particularly those who are mobilising against family practices, which they label as “cultural violence”, such as child marriage, female genital cutting, and sex-selective abortion (Merry 2009: 127). Therefore, I also use “violence against women” in order to interrogate its discursive association with “cultural violence”.

Before the advent of “gender violence”, anthropologists either elided violences they did not deem cultural (Harvey 1998: 74) or too improper, or wrote about “cultural

violence”, such as “honour killings” without associating these with “spousal abuse” or “femicide”. According to these early analyses, in Mediterranean “honour and shame cultures”, shame, equated with sexual modesty, is desirable in women, but dishonourable in men, who must prove their sexual prowess and defend their personal and family honour with violence, if necessary (Pitt-Rivers 1965). The emergence of feminist anthropology in the 1970s changed the way anthropologists wrote about such topics by highlighting the question of women’s subjugation and ability to resist (Lewin 2006). Over the course of the 1980s, feminist anthropologists began to replace the study of women as a unitary category with the study of gender and the contexts in which it is formulated and mobilised (Strathern 1988, 2016), paving the way for later formulations of violence as a way of “doing gender” (Merry 2009: 11).

Following Sanday’s (1982) publication on sociocultural dimensions of rape, the introduction of “gender violence” in the 1990s heralded another shift in anthropological analyses. *Sanctions and Sanctuary: Cultural Perspectives on the Beating of Wives* (Counts, Brown, and Campbell 1992) and *Sex and Violence* (Harvey and Gow 1994) were landmark edited volumes of that time. The latter took the relativizing stance that violence is a commonplace, everyday feature of sexual relationships in Britain and many other parts of the world, cutting across demographic categories. In her essay, Harvey wrote that it was common for the Andean men she worked with to beat their wives, but that women considered such treatment to be normal, or even funny, and emphasised that they fought back. Harris’ essay in the same volume presents a similar narrative. Note, however, that neither of these well-crafted essays included Andean women’s actual statements beyond common sayings, following writing conventions of that time.¹¹ Harvey herself noted elsewhere that such studies are problematic because “Anthropologists project otherness through the mere selection of their research topics and to focus on wife-beating implies dissociation and a sense of separation between observer and observed that can all too easily be used to strengthen racist attitudes” (1998: 74). Thus, precisely because analyses, such as hers, are highly complex and layered, there is a risk of these being read superficially

¹¹ Perhaps anticipating this critique, Harris later commented, “Old-fashioned ethnographic authority is no longer enough. Where we want to make controversial claims about peoples’ understandings and perceptions, direct quotation is becoming almost a requirement” (2006: 16). During Harris’s early fieldwork in the mid-1970s, Andean peasants were unfamiliar with the interview format, forcing her to rely more on observations. However, with the rise of televised interviews, ethnographic interviews eventually became easier to conduct (ibid.).

and of ethnographic examples being decoupled from their interpretation. When academic research is translated into activist terms, it is necessarily simplified, often to the point of misrepresentation. I am all too aware that anthropological research, such as mine, may contribute to simplistic notions of “cultural violence”, even when it seeks to critique that very notion.

With the rise of applied anthropology in the 2000s, a number of studies approached gender violence as a universal problem with considerable variation in its cultural expression. For example, Merry asserted that “Gender violence is not a new phenomenon. It takes place in virtually all societies around the world, but only in the last thirty years has it become visible as a major social issue” (2009: 1). Employing a deterritorialised ethnographic approach, Merry (2006) traced the development of gender violence discourses in United Nations offices and how these moved to contexts around the globe. In contrast to the great variation in kinship patterns and sociocultural attitudes to companionship and sexuality, emergent anti-violence strategies were strikingly similar to each other, adhering to Euro-American understandings of violence. Thus, Merry argued that gender violence had become the site of a new global biopolitic (*ibid.*). Influenced by international organisations’ emphasis on medical and human rights intervention, “violence against women and children [...] often remains trapped in a medicalized/psychologized framework or confined to a totalising discourse on patriarchy and its aberrations” (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004: 4), though many anthropologists have critiqued these tendencies.

Notably, the World Health Organisation (2013) framed violence against women as a “global epidemic”. This view has been criticised for identifying female victims of violence, particularly raped women, as a “horrific wound” (Mookherjee 2015: 251), thus reducing them to the physical violation they experienced, while reducing violence to that physical aspect (Ross 2003: 93). The increasing focus on the mental health category of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) has also raised concern. For instance, in post-conflict Sri Lanka, narrative styles employed by humanitarian agencies, introducing the Western psychiatric category of PTSD and focussing violence on its victims, eroded local narrative styles geared towards violence-containment. Thus, by promoting a no-tolerance approach to violence, embodied by the figure of the vengeful “fearless woman”, humanitarian agencies unintentionally promoted the escalation of violence (Argenti-Pillen

2003). Another key problem with emphasising the health and legal side of violence against women is its focus on the victim-perpetrator dyad, which risks portraying violence as “somebody else’s problem,” or as an opportunity to intervene as an altruistic, morally superior Other (Mutua 2001). In Harvey and Gow’s incisive phrasing,

Times have changed, and we might be reluctant to send missionaries to clear away the gross moral darkness of their religions, but we would not be reluctant to insist that development projects must address the position and interests of women, even when these conflict with those of men or of traditional cultural practices. Western people, often uneasy about the domination intrinsic to their modes of action, are happiest when domination is done to empower the dominated (1994: 4).

Addressing the emergence of a globalising “new humanitarianism”, recent anthropological studies of violence against women often collaborate directly with activists and support workers, dedicating space to their voices (Wies and Haldane 2015, 2011; Cheng 2015; Warren 2012; lewallen 2010; Merry 2009; Speed et al. 2006), deconstructing the victim-victimiser dichotomy, and often approaching violence as a phenomenon that is simultaneously global and local: “all ‘place’ making and all ‘force’ making are both local and global, that is, both socially and culturally particular and productive of widely spreading interaction” (Tsing 2000: 353).

In addition, Indigenous women’s groups and intersectional feminist anthropologists are contributing to the growing recognition that Indigenous women’s rights claims often differ from those of international organisations (Merry 2009; Susskind 2015). The International Indigenous Women’s Forum (FIMI) published a companion report to the UN Secretary-General’s (2006) *In-depth study on all forms of violence against women*, highlighting that “Indigenous women experience human rights violations ‘at the crossroads’ of their individual and collective identities” (2007: 1), particularly with respect to “neoliberalism and development aggression; [the vilification of] tradition; structurally entrenched State violence; armed conflict; the impact of migration and displacement; and, the relationship between violence and HIV/AIDS” (ibid.). Similarly, MADRE, an international women’s human rights NGO working in partnership with Indigenous women’s groups in Nicaragua, Kenya, Guatemala, and several other countries, has criticised the mainstream women’s movement for ignoring Indigenous women’s needs

and realities, such as its: “Restricted conceptualisations of ‘domestic violence’; an uncritical emphasis on separation from abusive partners; the privileging of criminalisation strategies in anti-violence work; [and] the notion that gender-based violence is rooted in ‘culture’” (Susskind 2015: 17). Regarding the last point, Indigenous women often argue that “[c]olonization, Christianity, and assimilation have eroded egalitarian indigenous traditions, yet the latter continue to shape the identity and worldview of some indigenous peoples and to provide a foundation for indigenous anti-violence strategies” (ibid.: 23). In other words, violence against women is encompassed by larger structures of violence.

Structural violence

According to Merry, “Violence in intimate relationships is inseparable from societal conflict, violence, and injustice. [...] Interpersonal gendered violence and structural violence – the violence of poverty, hunger, social exclusion, and humiliation – are deeply connected” (2009: 2). For instance, women of any social sphere may experience intimate violence, but Indigenous women typically have less access to the resources that would enable them to leave and be safe from an abusive partner. Thus, the relative impact of gender inequalities depends on individual intersectional identities, such as a person’s age, lineage, socio-economic status, profession, skin tone, health, and sexual orientation (cf. Crenshaw 1989, 1991; Collins and Bilge 2016). In Latin America, “levels of formal education, rates of illiteracy, poverty, and insecure work are progressively worse for white men, white women, mixed-race men, mixed-race women, Afro-Latin men, Afro-Latin women, indigenous men, and indigenous women” (Radcliffe 2015: 4). Such “hierarchies of difference” arose “in the aftermath of colonialism when dominant understandings of race, masculinities and femininities, and imaginative geographies of rural and urban areas, were established under power relations that favoured the whiter, the urban, the masculine, and the wealthier over others” (ibid.). According to Kellogg (1997), Mexican Indigenous women went from having a “parallel and equivalent” status as men, to having “separate but unequal” rights under Spanish law.¹² Therefore, violence against women cannot be

¹² The 16th-century Spanish lawyer Alonso de Zorita reported about the Nahua system of law that it was more just and civil than the Spanish system (de Zorita and Keen 1994). For more background, excellent overviews of Nahua-Aztec history include Prem (2008) for the period up to the Conquest and Lockhart (1992) for the colonial period.

understood in isolation from women's lives and the other issues they have to confront: A state economy that favours some segments of society over others actively produces vulnerability, for instance, via crowded housing conditions (Adelman 2008).

Note that according to the intersectionality theorists above, *pace* Ortner (1974), females are not the universally oppressed gender, but males may also be disadvantaged vis-à-vis females in certain respects, such as regarding the ability to find employment. People may experience multiple forms of negative bias, the cumulative effect of which is greater than the sum of its parts, or positive biases might offset negative biases against them. Thus, a Milpaltense-born, fair-skinned, middle-aged grandmother is likely to be in a far more advantageous position than a young, darker-skinned male immigrant worker from Oaxaca. Moreover, many other issues affect Milpaltenses' quality of life and may influence the impact of gender inequality, including corruption, pollution, unemployment, diabetes, and rising crime levels. If, for instance, historical and continuing discrimination against Indigenous people influences Milpaltenses to omit the word "violence" when speaking about certain problems within their own community, in order to avoid being stigmatised as "primitive" and "violent" by city-dwelling Mexicans, this could prevent a vulnerable individual, such as a young woman, from perceiving and denouncing instances which others might describe as "violent". Rather than constituting separate spheres of existence, these categories intersect to form a single structure of violence in an individual's experience (cf. Graeber 2012: 113).

Originally, structural violence was "defined as the cause of the difference between the potential and the actual" (Galtung 1969: 168). It denoted long-term historical politico-economic oppression, exclusion, and inequality, such as avoidable AIDS deaths in South Africa (Le Marcis 2004). So far, there has only been a limited theoretical elaboration of structural violence (including intersectional violence) and there have been vivid debates surrounding its use in anthropology (cf. Bourgois 2001; Farmer 2004; Gupta 2012). Critics have argued that "structural violence" is a normative concept and not operationalisable: for instance, it is impossible to clearly separate it from non-violence in post-war Guatemala (Green 2004). Thus, structural violence does not lend itself to comparative study.

Defenders of the concept argue that violence always needs to be understood within a symbolic context because violence is not self-evident and is linked to structural

consequences and conditions (Zizek 2008). For example, Bourdieu's (1977, 2001) notion of "symbolic violence" described a "violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2002: 167), such as when men and women have internalised that women are inferior to men and women accept being treated accordingly. Bourdieu places gendered violences, such as war rape and women's common preference for choosing taller partners on a continuum, yet the familiarity and seeming triviality of the latter form of violence, render it invisible. Drawing on this, Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois consider the line between wartime and peacetime violence to be blurred: "Everyday violence encompasses the implicit, legitimate, and routinized forms of violence inherent in particular social, economic, and political formations" (2004: 21). However, feminist analysts complicated Bourdieu's theory by showing that women may simultaneously accept and refuse gender-based subjugation (Skeggs 1997). For example, Vietnamese women often choose to stay with abusive husbands, while contesting their behaviour, influenced by Confucian cultural norms which place a high value on women's self-sacrifice and family reputation (Kwiatkowski 2015).

As Bourdieu's theory of violence depends on the subconscious internalisation of a certain social order and forecloses the possibility of effective resistance, it would hardly be applicable to the case of Leona, who was aware of having chosen a particular perspective on violence. However, the broader notion of intersectional structural violence productively troubles Milpaltense discourses highlighting women's power: Had Leona been able to provide for her children on her own, without social stigma, would she still have chosen to dutifully stay with her violent husband? I am not disputing Leona's agency in making that choice, but it is clear that her options were limited. Similarly, her husband's actions were not simply his choice, but followed a common pattern in Milpa Alta. Knowledges are not only situated in my interlocutors' lifeworlds, but also at the interstices of broader social, political, economic and historical developments. Thus, structural violence is not an unproblematic concept, but one that troubles questions of power and responsibility in a productive way. The concept of violence is inherently uncertain and indeterminate in the sense that it oscillates between structure and agency, collective responsibility and individual choice (Das 2008; Das and Kleinman 2000). For this dissertation, structural violence is a methodological starting point, meaning that I am casting my ethnographic net wide. Moreover, structural violence deconstructs the notion

of violence being a purely “private” or “local” phenomenon, showing that global processes are implicated in violence against women.

A cosmological approach

To deconstruct the notion that violence against women could be reduced to a form of “cultural violence” – in the sense that culture encourages and/or legitimates violence – it is instructive to study the cosmologies of the people in question. Cosmologies are systems of knowledge about how the world works and what is in it, defining “ideas about the basic frameworks of power, intentionality, and responsibility that influence human lives and emanate from the world of spirits, ancestors, ghosts, deities, and the like” (Strathern and Stewart 2007: xiv). These differ from morality in that “for the most part morality is explicit while cosmology is implicit” (ibid.).¹³ Hence, studies of cosmologies allow for understanding cultural logics of violence and gender, and thus offer ways of challenging engrained assumptions about these (e.g. Strathern 1988, 2016). This means that violence and gender may at once be universally observable phenomena and culturally specific in their symbolism (Harris 1994: 59). For example, the 1994 Rwandan genocide “followed a cultural patterning, a structured and structuring logic,” (Taylor 2001: 101): the specific forms which violence took evoked “flow/blockage” imagery, which is central to local patterns of thought and practice in general. Yet cultural specificities in the ways that violent practices are carried out, and in what these mean to the people involved, do not imply that violence is rooted in culture: for example, anthropologists have argued that violence among Indigenous peoples can often be traced back to the political, economic, and social upheavals of colonialism and state formation (Ferguson and Whitehead 1991). In addition, current anthropology typically conceives of culture “as a process, as a property of social relations, and not as an already finished ‘thing’” (Good Eshelman 2015b: 25; my translation). Hence, “cultural violence” arguments rest on a simplified notion of culture, imagined as a monolithic, static “thing”.

¹³ Note that many Mexican anthropologists prefer the ethnospecific concept *cosmovisión* over cosmology (López Austin 1990; see Good Eshelman 2015b: 27), which describes “the structured vision with which the ancient Mesoamericans coherently combined their notions of the environment they lived in and of the cosmos in which they situated human life” (Broda 1996: 428, my translation).

For example, Harris argued in her ethnography of conjugal violence in the Andes of Northern Potosí, Peru, that the local institutionalisation of fighting emerged as a response to particular historical events and structural violence. Over time, fighting became a “means of self-definition in a world of ethnic division” (Harris 1994: 41). Similarly, High pushed back against the notion that Indigenous Amazonians are “culturally violent”: “Although much of this image can be attributed to enduring stereotypes about Amazonia, at certain times anthropologists too have conceptualised violence as a purely localised or even primordial aspect of Amazonian culture” (2015: 2). He instead analyses violence “as a symbolic practice through which Waorani people today understand themselves, their ancestors, and [non-Waorani] people” (ibid.: 3). Framing it as their analytical entry point, both Harris and High turn the “cultural violence” argument on its head, arguing that violence helps us to understand culture and social relations, rather than being explained by culture.

Harris also cautioned against imposing British feminist frames of interpretation onto the Peruvian context: While the pattern of husbands blaming their wives’ provocations and alcohol for violence may sound familiar, the symbolic association of male “wife-stealers” and warriors with the mythic image of predatory condors stood for a culturally specific “radical difference between women and men which is grounded in sexual difference, and which translates into terms of domination and victimisation” (ibid.: 58). She concluded that men had a “duty” to perform “ambiguous” violence because it was necessary for social reproduction, both in territorial disputes and in their household, as marriage involved both “symmetrical,” shared work and the permanent re-enactment of the violent abduction of the bride. Viewed in this manner, conjugal violence assumed a near-sacrificial quality.

It is important to note that women often planned their “abduction” together with their prospective husbands, meaning that violence symbolism and discourse need not entail the actual infliction of harm (ibid.). Put bluntly, symbolic representations do not equal embodied experience. Yet the institutionalisation of violence through symbolic representations can be used to legitimate violence. This begs an important, yet unanswered question: How can women actually resist, if their resistance has become ritualised in cultural scripts of seduction? As mentioned before, symbolic violence is virtually impossible to eradicate because it complicates notions of consent and agency

(Bourdieu and Wacquant 2002: 167). One has to wonder whether the impossibility of agency is an artefact of the homogenising, timeless nature of Harris' and Bourdieu's structuralist analyses. What would change if Potosí women actually spoke in Harris' analysis (cf. Spivak 1988)?

Writing about the Waorani of Amazonian Ecuador, High offers a more nuanced approach to studying the cosmology of violence, making space for individual agency and cultural change, as well as linking local and global symbolism:

Violence in Amazonia should be understood in terms of both indigenous cosmology and the dramatic social, political, and economic changes that indigenous people face today. If, for example, "predation" is an important aspect of Waorani cosmology, such an ontological premise should shed some light on the particular ways that Waorani people remember violence and understand their current conflicts with [outsiders]. [... However, in] studying situations like these ethnographically, it becomes difficult – and misleading – to separate "indigenous cosmology" from processes often associated with "modernity" or "globalisation" (2015: 14).

High's approach "links indigenous cosmology to wider intercultural relations without simply reproducing popular representations" (ibid.). Methodologically, ethnographic studies of cosmology, such as High's, "integrate the study of material life and power relations into the same field of analysis as religion, symbolic, ethical, and aesthetic dimensions of collective life" (Good Eshelman 2015b: 25; my translation). In High's case, this meant drawing on a diverse data set "on interethnic relations, the history of Christian missionaries in Amazonian Ecuador, and even popular film imagery" (2015: 3). Similarly, I have sought to shed light on the complex entanglement of Catholic and Aztec symbolism, men's and women's discourses, and popular representations of love, struggle, and Indigeneity that shape Milpaltense understandings of violence against women by drawing on a broad array of sources. Most of my interlocutors did not speak of their cosmological frames of reference as such – in the same way as it would be unusual for ordinary Britons to explain what their worldviews and epistemologies consist of precisely. It was often easier for people to articulate what they did *not* believe in. I therefore pieced their cosmologies together by identifying recurrent concepts and patterns in conversations, local literature, everyday behaviours, and ritual practices, and then

specifically asked about those concepts. As religious specialists, interviews with a local *nabual*-shaman and a Catholic priest were particularly helpful for fleshing Milpaltense cosmologies out, as they were able and happy to articulate their systems of knowledge in detail. However, I did not privilege their statements over those of others. Milpaltense cosmologies, and the logics they engendered, were often only indirectly represented in discourse and contributed to shaping some, but not all, violent practices.¹⁴

Perhaps due to these difficulties, cosmology is a neglected topic in the study of violence against Indigenous women in Highland Mexico. In her study of a village in the outskirts of Mexico City, Melhuus (1996) argued that women's roles are modelled after the model of Catholic Virgins, such as the Lady of Guadalupe¹⁵. As the ultimate mother figure, *la madre sufrida* ("the suffering mother", Melhuus 1997: 191), the Virgin embodies feminine virtue through her suffering and through her "transcendence of sexuality" (ibid.: 190). According to this logic, a mother who stays with a violent husband is virtuous because she is suffering for the benefit of her children who depend on a father to provide for them (186). Melhuus also identified a "gendered morality", according to which men achieve their moral status through power, whereas women achieve theirs through virtue and self-sacrifice – an analysis which is not supported by the Milpaltense material, in which men and women are considered equally powerful, independently of their respective virtue¹⁶.

Importantly, there is not one monolithic Catholic or "syncretic" belief system upholding a particular structure of gender violence in Milpa Alta, but multiple, divergent, competing local cosmologies, which both maintain and trouble local structures of work and violence. Focussing on these cosmologies allows me to attend to the concepts structuring Milpaltense views, rather than impose my own research focus, and thus draws attention to problems of epistemology in the study of violence.

¹⁴ That discourse does not necessarily equal practice is of course an important insight for studies of violence against women, which have documented practices of victim-blaming alongside narratives of "always believing the victim" (e.g., Sharpe and Mascia-Lees 1993).

¹⁵ But see Navarro (2002) for a critique of superficial analyses of *marianismo* in Latin American gender studies.

¹⁶ See also Mayblin's (2010) critique.

A word on gender

Similar to “Indigeneity,” “women” and “gender” refer to constructed, relational, and performative, rather than natural, categories in this thesis (cf. Collier and Yanagisako 1987; Morris 1995; Strathern 2016). While, in broad terms, feminist anthropology of the 1960s opposed the “natural” category of sex to the “constructed” category of gender, current gender theory considers sex, gender and sexuality to be mutually constituted, giving rise to a multiplicity of subjectivities (Pateman 1990). These gendered subjectivities are further diversified by their intersection with other dimensions of identity, such as Indigeneity or ethnicity (Canessa 2005; Tsing 1993; Weismantel 2001). “Subjectivity” here refers to “the lived and imaginary experience of the subject” (Das and Kleinman 2000: 10) and “how the subject comes to be attached to larger collectivities giving expression to an astonishing range of emotions in relation to violence” (Das 2008: 184). For example, Levi (2008) complicated the notion of a coherent binary Mexican gender system of dominant males and passive females by analysing the discourse and performance of gender in Lucha Libre wrestling. She found that the public generally treated female *Luchadoras* with respect, rather than viewing them as “indecent” women, and *exótico* wrestlers, who perform feminine gay or trans personas, often triumphed over their male opponents. The ring therefore represents a public space of ludic hypermasculinity and gender reversal. Note, however, that I do not know of any transsexual individuals and only met two gay men in Milpa Alta, which is characterised by cis-heteronormative gender roles, with the exception of ritual cross-dressing at carnivals and weddings.

Building on the above section on “Structural Violence”, it is important to take women’s positionalities into account, as these play a major role in shaping their subjectivities, given that violence against women has often been linked to women’s subordinate social position in activist and scholarly analyses (see Merry 2009). For example, poor women in Coastal Ecuador are often subject to multiple forms of violence, including marital rape, extreme isolation, psychological abuse, and deprivation of political and economic rights. In the case of one woman, “leaving her husband freed her from [intimate partner violence] but exacerbated her experience of structural violence and social exclusion, and exposed her to new forms of psychological damage” (Friederic 2015: 178). After struggling to make a living on her own for three years, and being alienated from family and friends, who saw her choice as endangering her family’s health and security,

she reconciled with her husband. Knowing the cost of “independence”, other women “choose to simply endure” (ibid.).

Similar to the deprived rural women in Friederic’s example, Indigenous women are among the most marginalised sectors of society in most Latin American countries, positioned at the intersection of gendered and ethnoracial axes of inequality and oppression: For example, in the peasant community of Chitapampa, Peru, “gender intersects with status to structure and legitimate ethnic inequality within the community and even within households” (de la Cadena 1995: 343). In Mexico, Indigenous women not only often find themselves devalued and excluded in their interactions with government and social institutions, as well as on interpersonal levels, but Indigenous women are also the poorest sector of Mexicans, which means that they often lack the resources to leave a violent partner (Hernández Castillo 2001; González Ortíz and Vizcarra Bordi 2006; Smith-Oka 2013). This does not, however, justify homogenising and stereotyping Indigenous women as “victims of structures of domination [or] passive and uncritical reproducers of culture” (Bastian Duarte 2011: 156). Structural violence instead contributes to the shaping of feminine subjectivities in complex ways. For instance, Nahua women in Veracruz often expressed their opposition to reproductive and domestic violence through humour (Smith-Oka 2013: 175-182), while Nahua women in Guerrero have been protesting against the violence and macho attitudes of men, which celebrate sexual prowess and the violent defence of honour, which many associate with Spanish cultural influence (Raby 2012: 226). Their structural vulnerability to violence often inspires women to become involved in rights movements, which are fighting gendered political and social discrimination and violence, as well as threats to their culture and natural environment (González Ortíz and Vizcarra Bordi 2006: 22). Yet there they protest against these intersecting injustices, Indigenous Zapatista women have become targets for “political violence from the army and paramilitary groups and even domestic violence from their own life partners” (Hernández Castillo, Stephen, and Speed 2006: 43). Thus, if I were seeking to *explain the occurrence* of violence against women in Milpa Alta, these structural factors would be central to my analysis.

The present thesis instead focuses on understanding *the cultural significance* of political and interpersonal violence against women as well as the difficulty of naming certain practices as such: How do Milpaltenses attempt to explain violence? What does

violence mean to them? To approach these questions, I follow Das in critically dissecting notions of consent or legitimacy (2008: 184). Making the link between violence, gender and subjectivity explicit, Das argued that “sexual and reproductive violence are closely linked to the social and cultural imaginaries of order and disorder” (2008: 183; cf. Kowalski 2016) and that anthropologists must learn to read silences and bodily gestures because victims are rarely in a position to render their point of view explicit (Das 2007). Consent is particularly vulnerable to “foundational or origin stories that are told about the nation-state within liberal philosophy about giving life to the nation and dying for the nation [..., which] seem to normalise violence as part of gendered belonging to the nation-state” (Das 2008: 285). This biopolitical model may be partly applicable to Mexico, where the conquest of women was key to the colonial project (Stolke 2007), and may be viewed as continuing in current forms of reproductive violence against Indigenous women (Smith-Oka 2013). Writing about the Mexican state’s attempts to quash the Zapatista rebellion, Stephen argued that because “national gendered myths are part of the cultural scripts of rape”, male Federal Judicial Police agents sexualised Zapotec men and women in Oaxaca as whore-like “Malinches”, a slur derived from the Spanish Conquistador Cortes’s Maya- and Nahuatl-speaking interpreter and lover, Malintzin (2000: 838).¹⁷ However, many Indigenous women reject identification with inherited colonial images of the traitor-Malinche and the docile Virgin of Guadalupe, instead redefining their femininity as one of resistance and strength (ibid.). Thus, Mexican Indigenous women have not simply been excluded from an originary imagination of the social order, as they continuously provide counter-tropes. Mexico’s complex history has given rise to a distinctive landscape of gendered subjectivities and violences, which are also influenced by other liberal states. Accordingly, the question of the legitimacy of violence against women appears even more complicated than in Das’ example, as there are multiple, competing origin stories of the Mexican state at play (cf. Stern 1995). It is the purpose of the present thesis to illuminate some of these complexities in the current context of Milpa Alta.

¹⁷ Note that Malintzin’s negative reputation seems undeserved, as the woman’s ability to survive and adapt in a period of violent Conquest is worthy of admiration, according to Townsend (2006).

For those unfamiliar with the anthropology of gender and violence, it might be challenging to fully follow the lengthy overview above. One might also ask whether it is overambitious for this study to attempt speaking to such a large body of literature. I have taken a genre-defying, cross-cutting theoretical approach to studying violence against women because I consider the insights of intersectionality theory to apply as much to the sphere of justice as to disciplinary boundaries. Following common practice in the feminist anthropology of Latin America, I aim to *desalambrar*, “to undo fences”:

gender analysis can take apart and transform old analytic terrains [...] It also complicates [androcentric] models by forcing the recognition of multiple, gendered subjects whose activities and knowledge operate on history from the margins. Moreover, by retaining the notion of *desalambrar* – with its close attention to the role of structural factors in creating and sustaining relations of power – we avoid reducing subjectivity to individual identity per se, as both the site and object of struggle (Hurtig, Montoya, and Frazier 2002:32).

For instance, if there is a disciplinary “fence” between instrumentalist and poetic approaches in the study of violence, who stands to benefit from it? Do the rewards of neat theoretical abstractions outweigh the cost of producing something quite distant from the inevitably messy experience of one’s research participants? While this study builds on the insights and methods developed in each of the specialised fields of inquiry sketched above, I argue that an integrated, “unfenced” approach is far more likely to produce insights of practical applicability to research participants’ worlds. Achieving this also requires an ongoing conversation about research findings beyond the fieldwork period with all stakeholders. Accordingly, this dissertation is not structured by a fixed theoretical framework but instead by the pursuit of the question at hand, and its gradual reframing via engaging with the lived worlds and challenges faced by my interlocutors in Milpa Alta.

METHODOLOGY, ETHICS, AND POSITIONALITY



FIGURE 1: VIEW OF VILLA MILPA ALTA FROM THE ROAD TO SANTA ANA TLACOTENCO

Research design and methods

The present thesis is an in-depth longitudinal study of the (de)construction of violence via the interplay of divergent cosmologies (Scott 2007: 12-17; Taggart 1983) and of individual women's "lifeworlds" (Abu-Lughod 2008). The constructivist and interpretivist epistemology I and many other anthropologists adhere to posits that humans socially construct meanings and their worlds (Geertz 1993: 5; Blaikie 1999: 99). Accordingly, anthropological studies typically rely on "thick description", which is the ability to distinguish a "wink from a blink" by relating observations to cosmological symbols (Geertz 1993: 6), foregrounding empirical events rather than "putatively universal logics and their permutations" (Scott 2007: 3). This approach shares properties with both the sensitising and the hermeneutic tradition in the social sciences: I developed initial ideas of what to look for before fieldwork and continually refined these ideas until I had gathered enough data to replace these with local concepts and categories to describe the phenomenon of "violence against Indigenous women" (cf. Blaikie 2010: 110). Thus, I attempted to move back and forth between my interlocutors' and my own analytical perspectives, the results of which I compared with previous ethnographic studies to

validate to what extent the generalised results were applicable across groups (LeCompte and Goetz 1982: 43).

I situated my project in the macro-community of Milpa Alta (Nahuatl: *Malacachtepetl Momozco* or *Momochco Malacateitpac*, Farfán 2009: 215), which consists of 12 pueblos and is the most rural of the 16 boroughs of Mexico City, located to the south of its urban sprawl. (For a more detailed description, see Chapter 1.) I selected Milpa Alta as my field site because it reports the second-highest femicide rate among Mexico City's municipalities and shares a border with the State of Mexico, which reports the highest number of femicides in Mexico (OCNF 2015). In addition, this is where the most conservative variant of Nahuatl is spoken, the language of the Aztecs, which I had already begun to study and love in my undergraduate days. So I had already read about Milpa Alta years prior to this research, which facilitated my literature review and ability to adapt to the site once in Mexico. Furthermore, the Valley of Mexico has high historical relevance as a core site of colonial conquest, which makes it a centre of remembered violence whose meaning is “maintained and (re)produced by means of narratives and performances” (Argenti and Schramm 2010: 25). Initially, I had intended for this to be a study of oral histories and folktales of gender violence, which is part of the reason why I chose to work with several women-led cultural production groups. Yet I soon realised that very few Milpaltenses, mainly elders, were active storytellers at the time of my research. At the same time, I became increasingly interested in local contestations in the conceptualisation of gender and violence.

Focussing on these cultural groups, and fully participating in their activities, would normally seem like an unusual choice for a study on “violence against Indigenous women”, but it serendipitously proved to have several methodological advantages. To begin with, most of these groups were predominantly composed of women past their reproductive age. When I first arrived in Milpa Alta, as an unaccompanied, young white foreign woman, it seemed all too easy to find male interview partners, who were accustomed to the role of the “stranger-handler”. By contrast, many women initially treated me with suspicion, not only because I was a stranger, but also because of my independence and my friendship with shaman's apprentices, which cast doubt on my moral qualities. This perception began to change when my interlocutors learned I was a Roman-Catholic *uropea*, not a Protestant *gringa* (a negative epithet reserved for US-

Americans), and became involved in cultural revitalization groups. By marching along on Mexico's Independence Day and learning some Nahuatl, I wove myself into the social fabric of Milpa Alta and mobilized more advantageous gendered scripts regarding my person (Mazzei and O'Brien 2009): For example, after singing with the *tlacuateras* at Tlacotenco's Day of the Dead festivities, the town mayor thanked us, and mentioned that I wore the traditional women's clothing with dignity and even learned to weave, joking that I had acquired such skill that men had already asked me to weave them *calzones* (pants). So, in the beginning, joining these cultural groups gave me easy access to potential interviewees and helped to build rapport with them, apart from having a genuine interest in our activities. This was a common methodological approach among the sociocultural researchers of the area, and given the sensitive nature of my topic, it was imperative to build relationships of trust with my project participants. These sometimes close relationships, particularly with my host Socorro and her siblings' families, had the further benefit of allowing me to be present at all major life-cycle rituals.

Over time, these groups also revealed themselves as key sites in which competing local notions of violence, femininity and Indigeneity were articulated: sites in which ordinary women frequently discussed these topics without being prompted or feeling pressured to do so, and expressed a wide range of opinions (see particularly Chapters 1, 3, and 4). By not focussing my study on women's rights activists, health workers, social workers, or another group of people whose role is specifically defined in relation to violence against women, I was able to sidestep the pernicious ethnographic problem of inadvertently normalizing tropes which align specific, narrow roles of victim- and perpetratorhood in gender-based violence scenarios¹⁸: It is difficult to study violence against women without already constructing women as victims in advance. Yet in Milpa Alta and beyond, women who have experienced gender-based violence, rarely refer to themselves as victims, in part, because they do not want their identity to be permanently defined by their negative experiences: It is one thing to say one has been victimised at specific points in one's life, and quite another to be labelled a "victim". Instead, my interlocutors consisted both of women who identify as having been "victims" in the past, as well as those who never have, even if they did personally experience violence. Thus,

¹⁸ Here I am drawing on one of the main points of a roundtable discussion, *Intersectional Entanglements*, which I participated in at the 2018 Society for Applied Anthropology annual meeting (6 April 2018) in Philadelphia, PA, chaired by April Petillo (University of Kansas).

organising my inquiry around local knowledge and experience priorities (TallBear 2014) allowed me to avoid stereotyping Milpaltense women.

If my study had instead been focused on workers and service-users at the local Inmujeres branch, I would have worked with a sample of women who are much more willing to identify as “victims” than the average woman, but this would have been unrepresentative of the wider Milpaltense population. While I am committed to accuracy, this decision inevitably affected my loyalties and analysis, making me more critically inclined towards Inmujeres’s definitions of violence against women and cultural violence (see Chapter 2), and perhaps less critical of the cultural groups I was working with. This did not blind me to the ways in which such groups contribute to sustaining gendered inequalities in Milpa Alta, but it did make me more invested in giving space to their often misunderstood point of view and taking it seriously. Similarly, it was never my objective to undermine those seeking to help vulnerable women, but it is important to question the seemingly common-sense notion that “informing women about their rights can do no harm” (Friederic 2015: 180). Feminist activists and anthropologists alike can “orient our projects towards the aspirational, but with full acknowledgement of the daily, cultural and political realities of everyday life. When we fail to do so, we risk inserting ‘newly liberated’ women into larger dynamics of structural violence” (ibid.: 181). Thus, precisely because I was taking the intersecting structural vulnerabilities of Milpaltense women seriously, I have sought to hold various perspectives in tension, speaking to and getting to know as many women, and also men, as possible. As influential individuals on moral matters, Tlacotenco’s priest and Villa Milpa Alta’s best known shaman were interviewed on their observations relating to structural violence and kinship in the community.

I did, however, also carry out a limited amount of interviews with Inmujeres workers and service-users, the results of which I have included in Chapter 2 and 5. Inmujeres also invited me to participate in a symposium they organized on preventing violence against women and children in December 2015, which was the only time we collaborated as such. Given my detached, though friendly, relationship with Inmujeres, I suspect that I was not trusted to the point of giving me access to Inmujeres’ statistical data or allowed to observe their job-training sessions: Even though I had been verbally given permission by the Inmujeres director, repeated reminders did not actually yield access to the data or the sessions. I was politely ignored, rather than refused. It would

have been useful to have this data to have more detailed examples of violence against women in Milpa Alta from women who were still experiencing it, or had recently been subjected to it, and how they were dealing with it, which may have had implications for their conceptualization of violence. The temporality of trauma strongly conditions how it is narrated: It is much easier to speak of past violence than of the presence of it (Daniel 2000: 336). As I will explain in Chapter 2, I believe Inmujeres's apparent lack of trust was not personal, but levelled against anthropologists in general. I would have had to work for, or be in official partnership with, Inmujeres to get more comprehensive access, but I wanted to retain my ability to criticise, and I was also concerned that being perceived as a "feminist", a negative term among most Milpaltenses, might limit the circle of those willing to speak to me.

Working with groups of women finally had the advantage of allowing me to gain insight into how power and ideas are negotiated between individuals, shedding light on "peer communication and group norms" (Kitzinger 2005:57). Inspired by van Vleet's methodology (2008: 19-20), I combined participant observation with the "naturalistic" strategy of recording long conversations, thus gaining more information about the context and everyday performance of narratives of violence and gender, instead of merely relying on the elicitation of these themes during interviews. My interview methodology was further influenced by Briggs' (1986) approach, particularly his insights on how not to violate local norms of seniority and respect, which were similar in both of our fieldsites. To improve access, interviews with bilingual Nahua were carried out in Spanish, but I also elicited related concepts in Nahuatl. Overall, I spoke to over a hundred individuals, and was more closely acquainted with approximately 40 people.

During fifteen months of data collection and analysis, starting in late September 2014 and ending at the beginning of January 2016, I used a combination of qualitative methods. During the first four months, I commuted to Milpa Alta from Coyoacán, Mexico City, which gave me the opportunity to attend some classes on Nahuatl language and culture at the National University of Mexico (UNAM), and consult university libraries, while scouting for a suitable base in Milpa Alta. I did not entirely limit myself to doing fieldwork in Milpa Alta, as the lives of the people I studied and lived with are not neatly contained within the borders of their pueblos. Not only were many Milpaltenses quite mobile and had ritual kinship bonds with people in other states of Mexico and

relatives abroad, but their lives were strongly affected by national and transnational politics. In addition, I have maintained correspondence with Milpaltense friends after my return to Edinburgh, which yielded some additional material.

Ethics

In developing an ethical framework for this research, I based myself on the Association of Social Anthropologists' ethical guidelines and the University of Edinburgh's policies and procedures. All my research participants' names were anonymized and I recorded my fieldnotes digitally, so that they were encrypted. When women and men chose to tell me about their specific experiences of violence, I was sensitive in guarding their wellbeing and privacy, and made sure to have their full consent (cf. Howell 2004). In selecting illustrations, I have not included any photographs on which named interlocutors' faces are recognisable.

The majority of my ethnographic data consists of notes and audio files from my “participant observation” with cultural revitalisation groups, public and private social events, and visits to specific families. This approach to data collection served multiple methodological purposes: It helped to introduce myself to the community and to get to know Milpa Alta and its social organisation, discourses, and cultural production in some depth, thus helping to build rapport and contextualise violence against women. I also regarded it as an ethical requirement: When I asked my interlocutors what they would like me to do in exchange for their participation in my research, most responded that I should *convivir* (live together) with them. Thus, they were not interested in a tit-for-tat exchange relationship, but in my long-term affective and social investment in the community. The demand that I should live like one of them and participate in the activities that mattered most to them – ideally even marry into the community, as was often hinted – meant that, for the most part, I only pursued my research indirectly and serendipitously, only conducting few formal interviews, which still yielded a considerable amount of material on violence and gender relations.

In my interviews, I did not adopt a testimony-focused approach because testimonies may not only serve to empower those who experienced violence by “making their voices heard” and revealing “the truth of what happened” but conversely encourages

people to relive traumas as a condition of their recognition while distorting their experience through “particular genres of speech and self-presentation” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012: 147; cf. Das 2007: 37). Instead, I adopted a two-pronged approach in my interviews: On some occasions, I posed open questions about violence in Milpa Alta to an individual or a group, so that it was up to my friends whether to answer in a general way or to draw on their own experiences. Other times, I framed my questions as life history interviews, rather than testimonies as such. In many cases, women’s life stories included experiences of violence, which were mentioned without me having to prompt my interlocutors to speak about violence. Violence was a common-place, rather than taboo subject, though it was rarely referred to as “violence” (see “Silent Violence”, Chapter 3). Once someone had mentioned such an experience, I would ask if they would like to speak more about it, which they were often happy to. Indeed, some found it cathartic to speak about their experiences of violence to a sympathetic and understanding interlocutor: Following Jackson, the “empowering aspect of storytelling is inextricably linked to the sharing and integration of one’s experiences with that of others. In recounting one’s own story, one salvages and reaffirms [...] the *social* bonds that bind one to a community of kindred souls” (2002: 133). In several cases, it was precisely the fact that I had listened to and validated a friend’s violent experiences that brought us closer.

Thus, some interviews were bonding experiences. Other answered more matter-of-factly. I was able to largely avoid negative reactions because I was cautious about approaching friends for one-on-one interviews, most of which took place towards the end of my research. This enabled me to build trust with my interviewees and get to know them in advance, so as to avoid asking about something they would not want to talk about. Unfortunately, this cannot always be foreseen. If someone experienced an emotional break-down in reliving negative experiences, whether in an interview or a casual conversation, I immediately focused on restoring my interlocutors’ wellbeing, rather than pursue my questions, as I would do with friends in a non-research context.

For example, I already knew a lot about my friend Bety’s difficult life from our previous conversations. Nonetheless, I had to break the interview off as soon as it had begun: What I had, naively, conceived of as simple entry questions, such as her age of marriage and how many children she had, turned out to be fraught with intense emotion: She was only 13 when she got married and had lost several of her children. This example

shows that there is no such thing as an innocent question – every person’s experiences and affects are different. As we at a *tlacuáleras* meeting, I apologised to Bety and we got back to chatting and joking with the other women, as if nothing had happened.

On a different occasion, I was at home with my 70-year-old host mother, Socorro, wondering why nobody in Milpa Alta seemed to be talking about the 43 missing students from Ayotzinapa, Guerrero. News reports suggested that they had been forcibly “disappeared” by the state (Mora 2017). I expressed that I would have expected Milpaltenses to be particularly indignant, rather than disengaged, given that these students came from a Nahuatl-speaking region of Mexico. Instead of answering, Socorro silently shed tears, and I was mortified at my apparent insensitivity. But given that we were both physically and emotionally close, it was easy to make amends. Forming friendships with my interlocutors generally had the advantage that we could be open about our feelings, address problems, and fix them. Speaking with people repeatedly over a long period of time was important because it allowed me to correct wrong or negative impressions. These relationships were messy and difficult, but also immensely rewarding.

On paper, experiences take on a life of their own. Once women’s narratives enter the public sphere, they become “social facts” and can be contested, even accused of being entirely fabricated (Ross 2003: 93). I agree with Schepher-Hughes’ that “not to look, not to touch, not to record, can be the hostile act, the act of indifference and of turning away” (1992: 27-28). Yet I consider it equally important to document what makes Milpaltense women’s lives worth living and often wonderful, lest ethnography devolve into “violence porn” (cf. Robbins 2013). Milpa Alta may be a deprived area of Mexico City, but it does not lack for joy. I am committed to making my research as useful and accessible as possible for my friends fighting for social justice in Milpa Alta and elsewhere by communicating my key findings to the Milpaltense community in simple, clear terms. In brief, there is no fully unproblematic way of writing about violence, but I have sought to anticipate and counteract potential problems as much as possible and am willing to take responsibility going forward.

Positionality and serendipity

My knees were weak. Perhaps it was because of the lengthy bus journey from the city centre, but as I stepped off the small *pesero* bus to Tlacotenco, I tripped and tore the fabric of my paper-thin trekking trousers, blood running down my leg. Deeply embarrassed at my clumsiness, I arrived at the native scholar's home for our planned walk in the forest. He ushered me inside past his snapping, snarling dogs, and ordered his son to tend to my wound. The son, in his early thirties, and single, as the scholar impressed on me, kneeled before me to disinfect my knee. Later my friend Yolotl, a slender, curly-haired, 40-year-old artist from Villa Milpa Alta, who has emigrated to the United States but visits her family regularly, commented with a wide smile, "they pamper the woman who isn't from Milpa Alta but who is a *catrina* (white woman from elsewhere): the mother-in-law takes on all the responsibilities so that the son never lacks for clean clothes and food, and she treats the daughter-in-law like a beloved daughter, like a princess."

After this treatment, the scholar and I set off on our walk, on which he was going to explain the surroundings of Tlacotenco and the fascinatingly diverse local flora to me. Given the large age difference and our pleasant and enlightening previous conversations, which included an interview with him and his wife, I had not suspected any ulterior motives on his part. Yet the further we penetrated into the forest, the more his tone transformed, taking on flirtatious notes, such as asking me which famous actor I fancied. I became painfully aware that he was probably stronger than me and that nobody would hear me if I screamed. When I sat down to rest, as my knee was hurting, he suggested that it might help if he licked it, edging closer to me. I firmly refused, and picked up a sharp-edged stone, keeping it clenched in my fist for the rest of the walk.

During fieldwork, like so many of the Milpaltense women I admire, I sought to be prepared and vigilant, in the hope of preventing violence, rather than responding to it after it already happened. Contradicting several men who had told me I should not worry, as Milpa Alta was "safe", women often expressed concern for me, and suggested that I walk with a stick or a water bottle to fend off dogs. Yet you cannot always be on your guard. I consider myself very fortunate that I was subject only to catcalls, propositioning, and furtive groping when dozing off on the bus. It was enough to give me a stake in the topic of violence against Milpaltense women, despite my experience being incommensurate with that of my female friends and interlocutors. While I had the

immeasurable privilege of being able to choose whether I stayed or left, no woman can be sure of escaping the prospect of encountering violation and sexism. Though not all of my research choices were prudent, immersive fieldwork is rarely bar of any risk (but see Berry et al. 2017). Hence, intersectionality is as much an overarching methodological issue regarding ethnographic fieldwork as it is a theoretical one.

As the vignette above illustrates, it is possible to be studying “up” and “down” at the same time, for my elite European privilege and white feminine vulnerability to coincide. This destabilises common assumptions about the power relations enshrined in anthropological encounters. Talal Asad rightly highlighted how ethnography is enmeshed in power relations and critiqued ethnographers’ entitlement to “uncover the implicit meanings of subordinate societies” (1986: 163).¹⁹ Positioned as a researcher at an elite European institution, my work not only describes Indigenous Mexicans, but contributes to how notions of “Indigeneity” and “Mexicanness”, are constructed. Following Simpson (2017), any anthropological research on, with, or by Indigenous people is already deeply enmeshed in identity politics, with serious implications for their self-image, rights, and power. Indeed, research in general is “a significant site of struggle between the interests and ways of knowing of the West and the interests and ways of resisting of the Other” (Smith 2012: 31). As Smith argues, “Western disciplines are as much implicated in each other as they are in imperialism. Some, such as anthropology, made the study of us into ‘their’ science, others were employed in the practices of imperialism in less direct but far more devastating ways” (ibid.: 46). I recognise with no small amount of trepidation that seeking to describe some elements of Milpaltense women’s worlds in not simply a contribution to knowledge, and it certainly does not constitute a charitable exercise in getting their voices heard (cf. Westwood and Radcliffe 1993: 4) – it is a deeply political act. Yet while I must acknowledge these crucial differences, and deal with these responsibly, I do not wish to reify them. Beyond the troubling structural inequalities enshrined in doing field research in a context I was foreign to, my own and my interlocutors’ privileges and vulnerabilities, and the precise extent to which these mattered in our ethnographic encounters, varied situationally. Interestingly, my positionality was deemphasised by my interlocutors over time. While some, like Bety, continued to refer to

¹⁹ But note that in doing so, Asad was making problematic assumptions about the ethnographer’s identity and the nature of power itself.

me as “*la güera*” (the light-skinned one), reminding me of my Otherness and privilege, other *tlacuateras* insisted that I was one of them now: a “*santanera*” (person from Santa Ana Tlacotenco). Nobody is a static assemblage of identity categories – some types of privilege, or advantage, are serendipitous.

Finally, some omissions are inevitable. Given that it is mostly women studying violence against women, who often mainly work with women, we are only hearing partial accounts. I am all too aware of the gendered limitations of my findings. Had I been male, I could have worked more closely with men and they might have spoken about machismo and violence more openly. Similarly, had I been a mother, women would have spoken more about their roles as mothers and the tribulations of marriage. Had I been Milpaltense, I would have had more knowledge of certain matters and possibly less awareness of, or interest in, others. Yet I would have also been less able to work with multiple groups and feuding parties simultaneously, as Indigeneity and kinship politics would have required that I be loyal to a specific group or individuals (see next chapter). Most groups were eager to claim me as their member because of the perceived prestige involved in being associated with a foreign researcher, which could again be leveraged politically.

Though I did not consciously leverage my privilege in Milpa Alta, it became fairly obvious on one occasion: Socorro was grieving a teenage friend who had disappeared. She was worried that the girl might be dead, but her parents refused to speak about their daughter. Unlike Socorro, I had much more access to information, as many people were happy to speak with me and did not find my professional curiosity unusual. When I spoke to the missing girl’s aunt, the truth was accidentally revealed by a photograph: the girl had simply gotten pregnant and moved in with her boyfriend in another town. Back home, Socorro was greatly relieved to learn that her friend was alive and possibly well. If I did not have the institutional credentials and white privilege that enabled me to get funding for long-term research and attract Milpaltenses’ interest in speaking to me, my data would have been much more limited in certain respects.

THESIS OVERVIEW

According to Castro (2015), “it is important to study violence for what it can teach us about society”. In the following chapters, I will thus seek to bring the ghettoised study of violence against women back into the fold of mainstream anthropological topics: violence, love, religion, and gender. In the process, I will examine every term in the phrase “violence against indigenous women,” without discarding it. As this is a study of concepts that does not assume that we already know what violence against women is and how its conceptualisation should be studied in a given context, but instead makes this its main question, I have cast my data collection net wide. You will hear the voices of Women’s Institute workers, single mothers, frustrated husbands, teachers and pupils, the local priest, “warrior women”, female leaders, and many others.

I introduce the context of Milpa Alta in Chapter 1, as well as the interwovenness of local understandings and politics of identity and environment. The image of interweaving recurs throughout the thesis to remind readers of the heterogeneity and dynamism of identity categories such as womanhood and Indigeneity.

Chapter 2 interrogates the oft-cited “awkward relationship” (Strathern 1987) between global activist and ethnographic ways of understanding violence against women. It introduces the Milpaltense branch of Inmujeres, a government agency dedicated to preventing violence against women and to supporting survivors. While their liberal philosophy of self-love and empowerment draws from wider Latin American and global gender violence discourses, I argue that there is also an ongoing cross-fertilisation of ideas between activist, anthropological, and local notions of violence, as well as tensions between these. I also unpack the problematic notion of “cultural violence” in this and the following chapters.

Chapter 3 deals with different kinds of cosmological understandings of violence. Via mythic narratives linking snakes and motherhood, Many Milpaltenses associated femininity with creative as well as dangerous, destructive powers, which they may use against men and other women. This ambiguity was mirrored in wider cosmological discourses of order and chaos. Violence emerged as being neither inherently bad nor good, but as potentially destructive and creative: Milpaltenses often interpreted acts in terms of maintaining or violating the social order, and acknowledged the potential productivity of the latter. Thus, while Inmujeres attempted to define particular acts as “violent”, and thus immoral, ordinary Milpaltenses’ narratives and experiences eluded this

definitional fixing. What violence is, depends on the cosmological frame of reference and on ongoing contestations and negotiations in practice.

I argue that Inmujeres' idea of women as victims of violence is undercut by Milpaltense ideas of women as "strong women" and "*guerreras*" (warriors) in Chapter 4. The idea of the warrior woman enshrines women's potential for violence, and draws from ideas about the Zapatista struggle, the revolutionary and Aztec past, the Old Testament, and New Age literature. This feminine warrior-like subjectivity resonates with other Latin American women's subjectivities, which emphasise *lucha* (struggle), suffering, and resilience. Women were constructed as balancing masculine forms of power through feminine domains of power, such as herbal magic, seduction, and gossip. Thus, many Milpaltenses described men and women as equally powerful. However, the gendered division of spheres of power meant that women who are seen as usurping masculine power, such as female politicians, faced considerable pushback from Milpaltense men and women alike.

In Chapter 5, an exploration of women's life history interviews will show that Milpaltenses often associated violence against women with love, viewing both as ambiguous, powerful agents of transformation. In many Latin American contexts, love is a major concept structuring social life, rather than just describing an emotion. However, the frequent privileging of interdependent love as process and mutual sacrifice stood in conflict with Inmujeres' disruptive, self-love-centred solutions to violence.

Unlike women's everyday hidden sacrifices, the feasts described in Chapter 6 draw attention to an exceptional situation in which men and women work equally hard, enacting local values, and defining religion, politics, and sociality in Milpa Alta. Yet the discrepancies between feast time and the everyday simultaneously bring the mismatch between symbolic equality and experienced inequality to the fore. I argue that, as feasts are about love, they are subject to the same dynamics and contradictions that affect conjugal relationships – complementarity, joy, mutual self-sacrifice, and, importantly, the potential for violence.

Summarising Milpaltense understandings of violence, the Conclusions argue that violence can only be understood in relation to love, and that culture should not be blamed for violence against women in Highland Mexico: Studying violence helps us to understand

the complexities of social life and individual experience in an interconnected world, more than culture explains patterns of violence. Finally, I suggest that international feminist activism needs to flexibly engage the similarities and differences of women around the world, rather than pursue a singular agenda if it is to lighten, rather than add to, Milpaltense women's burden.

1. Milpa Alta

Western culture made “objects” of things and people when it distanced itself from them, thereby losing “touch” with them. This dichotomy is the root of all violence.

Gloria Anzaldúa – “Entering into the Serpent”



FIGURE 2: TEUHTLI

When I first travelled to Milpa Alta in October 2014, I hiked uphill from the municipal capital, Villa Milpa Alta, to the town of Santa Ana Tlacotenco, which gave me time to appreciate the view of the dormant volcano Teuhtli, the main landmark and “guardian” of Milpa Alta (see fig. 2). Also present on the horizon was the ever-smoking Popocatepetl, the most active volcano in Mexico. The numerous hills and volcanoes surrounding Milpa Alta are not simply a backdrop to human activity but an arresting presence in their own right. Beyond their visual impact, Milpaltenses feel the hills in their bodies, not just through their daily climbs, as their territory rises precipitously from 7,381.89 feet to

12,106.3 feet above sea level (Barbosa and Terrones 2012: 23). Many women begin each morning with sweeping their patios to clear them from the dust blowing over from the mountain terrace fields. Despite their exemplary cleanliness, the air remains dusty. To live in Milpa Alta is to breathe the land, and, thus, Milpaltense engagements with the landscape shine a light on Milpaltense lifeworlds more broadly.

However, it is important to note that different bodies experience place and marginality differently, in the same way as place and marginality shapes different bodies: “social heterogeneity is coproduced within and through spatial heterogeneity, resulting in uneven landscapes of wealth and poverty” (Radcliffe 2015: 38). As Milpaltenses perceived Milpa Alta as an out-of-the-way place, a number of people seemed incredulous when I said I had found the place by bus without anyone guiding me there. Others contested the marginality of Milpa Alta: When someone spoke of going to *el centro*, “the centre”, common shorthand for Mexico City, another might mock them by asking, “¿El centro de Mixquic?” (“The centre of Mixquic?”), referring to San Andrés Mixquic, a rural town in the vicinity of Milpa Alta.

Before moving to Milpa Alta, I had been living in urban Coyoacán, Mexico City, for a few months, where my middle-class lifestyle was very similar to what I had been used to in Europe. To be living with a middle-class family in Milpa Alta was notably different: I was never alone, unless I actively chose to be, which now felt brutally anti-social. While I enjoyed the rare luxury of having my own room and the safety of a fence and a guard dog, I was now taking bucket showers and only had tap water every other day. Access to information was also far more limited, as local libraries did not have much literature on Milpa Alta and Wi-Fi access was only patchy. One time, I woke to no electricity, as somebody had stolen the copper wires on our street in the night. I also experienced gender and race differently: While being a white, single woman was unremarkable in Mexico City, I was now the object of stares and catcalls – sometimes, random strangers even asked to take a photo with me. Conversely, my older, brown-skinned Milpaltense female friends described feeling unsafe in Mexico City centre at any time of day, thus avoiding to go there unaccompanied. Like for Milpaltense women, moving around alone was only considered safe for me before 9 pm, whereas being a man or having a boyfriend meant being able to go anywhere, anytime. Seemingly paradoxically, depending on others could feel like freedom, while I found this suffocating in Europe. In

some ways, the differences between Milpaltense women and myself were only skin-deep, but our “pigmentised” horizons of experience also signified worlds of difference.

Hence, before I can address local understandings of violence against women in the following chapters, it is important to discuss Milpa Alta as a place and sociopolitical space. I will first cover some key facts, which point to Milpaltenses’ dependency on their environment. However, Milpaltenses do not automatically care for the environment, but come to care for it by building relationships with nature via multiple affective, embodied techniques. Finally, I will introduce “interweaving” as a way of capturing the complex multiplicities of religion and other aspects of culture in the context of coloniality. The image of interweaving will be guiding my approach throughout the thesis.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Milpa Alta borders the Mexico City municipalities of Tlalpan, Xochimilco, and Tláhuac to the West and North, the Morelos municipalities of Tepoztlán and Tlalnepantla to the South, and the State of Mexico municipalities of Chalco, Tenango, and Juchitepec to the East. It is known for the cultivation of *nopal* (vegetable cactus) on mountain terrace fields²⁰, the production of *mole* (a rich, chili-based sauce composed of manifold ingredients), back-strap-loom weaving, and approximately 720 religious and secular festivities across its twelve *pueblos* (towns) and their various districts every year (Wacher 2006: 14). In the 20 years since 1990, the population of the macro-community has doubled in size, and has reached a total population of 130,582 in 2010 (Delegación Milpa Alta 2011: 103). Milpa Alta is 28,623.4 hectares large, which represent 19.1 percent of Mexico City’s territory (Barbosa and Terrones 2012: 23). Apart from being Mexico City’s largest municipality, it is also the most rural, with 17,944 hectares of forest and agricultural land (Romero 2010). In fact, Milpa Alta translates as “elevated milpa”, the latter denoting a small parcel of land growing several crops together, including corn, gourds, and beans. Even though young

²⁰ Nopal was introduced to Milpa Alta during the golden age of the “Green Revolution”, when Mexico served as a laboratory for the world’s use of new technologies. The Mexican government partnered with the U.S. American government, the United Nations, the Food and Agriculture Organisation, and the Rockefeller Foundation to self-sufficiently feed its growing population (Cotter 2003). In this period, the ancestral *milpa* system largely gave way to the monocultivation of nopal. For a contemporary critique of the environmental, health, and cultural damage caused by monocultures in Mexico, see GRAIN 2014.

men increasingly aspire to service-sector jobs, virtually all have worked mountain terrace fields with their grandfathers at some point. After the Mexican Revolution²¹, nopal was cultivated on an industrial scale, so that currently, more than half of the population lives from the nopal trade (Gomezcésar 2005: 55-56). Many others no longer work the land, preferring to work in Mexico City and selling their land to immigrants from other, often poorer, parts of the country. According to economic indices, half of the population is poor and a quarter lives in extreme poverty (Jaramillo 2015), but most manage to make a living from what the land gives them, and may rely on family, ritual kin, and neighbours when in need. 73 % of men, but only 36 % of women, have an income (Delegación Milpa Alta 2011: 112). Among those between the age of 60 and 74, 19 % of women are illiterate, compared to 15 % of men, but almost all school-age Milpaltenses are literate (ibid.: 121).

Milpaltenses hold on to ethnic otherness, tied to their Nahuatl legacy, in order to claim Indigenous rights. Following Povinelli (2002), liberal multiculturalism places Indigenous people in a double bind of having to demonstrate an impossible standard of authenticity to claim rights that have been historically withheld from them because of their Indigeneity²². As the Nahuatl language loses ground, so do Milpaltenses literally lose communal ground²³. In 2010, the Ministry for Communication and Transport announced the so-called Arco Sur, a megaproject for a 235 km road connecting the south of Mexico City with the states of Morelos and Puebla. The plan was to build it on Milpaltense communal lands and protected natural areas. Fearing a range of environmental impacts, including increased air and noise pollution, biodiversity loss, crop damage, aesthetic degradation, deforestation and a large-scale disturbance of hydro and geological systems, Milpaltenses took to the streets, filed lawsuits, and temporarily succeeded in stopping the project (Ruiz Rincón 2017). However, Milpaltenses remain on their guard. The Marine Office of the Mexican government recently announced the building of a canine training unit in Milpa Alta (Gómora 2015). Even before the official announcement, false rumors about the building of an alleged “naval base” were quick to spread across Milpa Alta, and sparked loud protests (Villavivencio 2015).

²¹ For an introduction to the Mexican Revolution, see Knight 2016.

²² See Speed, Hernández, and Stephen 2006 for a discussion of the Mexican case.

²³ By “communal ground”, I mean forest and agrarian lands, the use of which is controlled by the communal representation of Milpa Alta, rather than the municipal government. The organized movement of the *comuneros* of Milpa Alta has been struggling for recognition of this territory since the Mexican Revolution of 1910 and peaked in the mid-1980s (Flores Melo 2012).

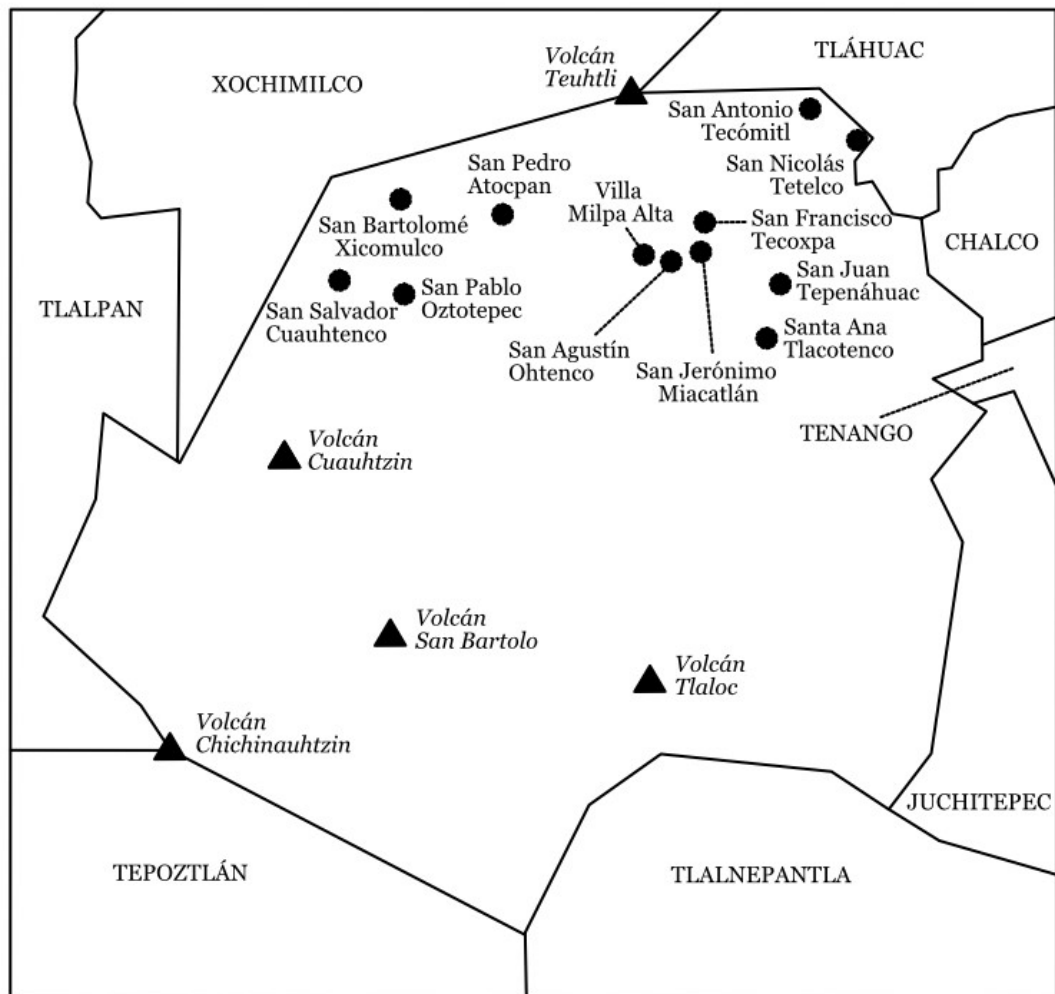


FIGURE 3: MAPS OF MILPA ALTA AND MEXICO

Above: Map of Milpa Alta showing its 12 pueblos (dots) and surrounding volcanoes (triangles) (compiled by Gordon Whittaker. Source: Bonilla Rodríguez (2009: 257) and Wikimedia Commons).

Below: Map of Mexico showing the position of Mexico City (Source: Wikimedia Commons).

It appears that the Mexican government favors environmentalist and multiculturalist policies when they take the form of modernization projects, and are not seen to stand in the way of economic interests. Mexico's economy relies heavily on oil, but the country has also "instituted some of the most ambitious and comprehensive climate change legislation in the world" (Howe 2014: 385). Much as Mexico in general, Milpa Alta has a complex relationship with environmental and other political concerns. While many Milpaltenses proudly defend their language, land, mountain forests and *cultura* as an indissoluble unit, often described as the basis of their identity and livelihoods (cf. Galicia Silva 1995: 225), the realities of Milpaltense life cannot be reduced to the essentialisms invoked by local identity politics.

The Milpaltense town of Santa Ana Tlacotenco, where I was based, has approximately 15,000 inhabitants. *Tonantzin* (Nahuatl: "Our Mother") Santa Ana, is a patron of weaving, marking Tlacotenco as a village of weavers. Tlacotenco has the reputation of being the Milpaltense pueblo with the most professionals and being the most culturally conservative pueblo. I have worked with over a hundred people in Santa Ana and the neighbouring town, Villa Milpa Alta. One thing most Milpaltenses I spoke to had in common, was a deep love of the land. Therefore, I will now devote some space to Milpaltenses' relationship with nature as a window onto local politics and ways of life, of which the gender politics and subjectivities discussed in later chapters are comparatively minor aspects. This will pave the way for a broader discussion of identity in Milpa Alta.

MOUNTAIN PEOPLE

For the extreme poor of Milpa Alta, the forest is central to their survival and to saving face. As my elderly host mother Socorro told me, if a husband fails to bring food home, a woman will get up and make whatever money she needs by going to the mountain. Anyone can collect and sell wood and medicinal herbs, providing those in need with a meagre, but essential source of income. Milpaltenses express this as being able to "*defenderse*" (defend themselves). The approximately 150 members of the community

conservation and environmental monitoring brigades, many of which are women, make a living off protecting the mountain forests, too. However, the brigade member I knew best, a 30-year-old man from an elite family, was very passionate about this work and did not only do it for the money, but also out of a sense of ancestral legacy. He enjoyed spending time in the forest, but was often frustrated by illegal loggers who in many cases were also Milpaltenses: “They don’t have a conscience towards our forest. If our grandparents defended it, why do you log?” Logging was only considered socially acceptable when it serves the communal good and is conducted in an organized, transparent fashion. My friend Jenny, a university-educated ecofeminist in her late twenties, told me, “patron saint festivals and pilgrimages are linked to our mountains because, for example, this is from where the firewood used in some [religious feasts] is extracted, in addition to the pennyroyal used in the processions.”

The communal representation blamed a combination of natural disaster, institutional failure, and the temptation of opportunity for the recent increase in illegal logging: According to a memo published in January 2018, “The problem of illegal logging in Milpa Alta has its origin in March 2016 when strong winds in the forest fell 661 trees, [... affecting] at least 459,090 cubic feet of forest material.” Though the community requested support from the National Forestry Commission (CONAFOR) and the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources (SEMARNAT) to remove the fallen trees, “both institutions showed apathy,” so that local groups “began to furtively remove the knocked down material, which soon led to a problem of illegal logging of live trees”. Only occasionally do the brigades catch someone in the act, take a picture, and denounce them online. Rarely do loggers suffer legal consequences. Meanwhile, huge loads of wood keep coming down the mountains at night.

Why many Milpaltenses devote a considerable amount of time and effort to protecting their mountain forests clearly goes beyond material interests, as more money can be made from illegal logging than from protecting the forest. The financial compensation is only a fraction of the Mexican minimum wage and not proportionate to the time and effort spent. Jenny spoke of the need to “behold [the forest’s] greatness,” referring to a sensation of awe, respect, and the pride in being associated with such beauty. Like many young Milpaltenses, Jenny spent time in Mexico City’s urban center and came to value the vibrant, lush greens, clear air, and potable water of Milpa Alta against the

dead grey concrete, smog, and polluted water of the city. Similarly, other Milpaltenses would often speak of the landscape with appreciation and affection. On walks with Milpaltense elders, every part of the forest traversed was full of meaning. My companions constantly brought the particulars of our surroundings to my attention, teaching me the names and properties of the plants around us, the Nahuatl names of the land and the stories people tell about it, the animals who live there, and the way people have used various parts of the forest. As a male elder said: “Note how your body feels, perceive the sounds and smells of your surroundings. Simply observe.” Intensively engaging with the forest is both a multisensory and an imaginative experience which interweaves the material environment with economic survival, politics, ritual practice, individual responses, ecological knowledge, and myth.

For example, many stories surround the rivalry of the warriors Teuhtli, the inactive volcano located in the heart of Milpa Alta, and the distantly visible active volcano, Popocatepetl, for the love of the “warrior princess” Iztaccihuatl, the white-tipped mountain beside Popocatepetl. It is not unusual to refer to Teuhtli as an “old warrior” watching over Milpa Alta, or mockingly, as a “spurned husband” and spent, burnt volcano. Because of their strong identification with this landmark, such mockery should also be understood as a form of self-deprecation. As the identification with warriors and lovers, as well as artistic representations of the story, indicate, the mountains take anthropomorphic form in mythic time. The elders who perform these stories occasionally embellish these with impersonations of the characters and enactments, modulation of voice, and creative twists. Often, idiosyncratic changes to the storyline reflect the storyteller’s own views and life experiences directly. For example, an elder who is happily in love cast Iztaccihuatl and Popocatepetl as “cosmic lovers”, whereas Leona chose to foreground Iztaccihuatl’s self-sacrifice in protecting her child, a small hill adjacent to Teuhtli. And so, the imagined lives of mountains and the people relating to them are creatively superimposed. The very practice of storytelling contributes to bringing the landscape “to life” in the participants’ imaginations: “words are but one aspect of a more complex multimodal aesthetics that also involves images, smells, tastes, feelings, sounds, and unseen vital energies and powers” (Uzendoski and Calapucha-Tapuy 2012, 24). Thus, storytelling is one of the ways in which Milpaltenses bond with the landscape and learn how to care for it, as it interweaves the landscape with personalized, creative embodiments of it and cultural tradition. However, many Milpaltenses dismiss these stories as mere

myths and urban legends, and the tradition of grandparents telling these stories to the young in the evenings is dying. Therefore, it would be incorrect to claim that all Milpaltenses are “animists” or “pantheists”, in the way Nahuas in other parts of Mexico have been described (e.g. Dehouve 2015; Arnold 1999; Sandstrom 2010). Nonetheless, young Milpaltenses, such as Jenny, remain conscious of their Aztec ancestors’ legacy and the politics of Indigeneity, thus describing mountains as something more than mere “conservation spaces”, but also as spiritual, “mystical places.”

Milpaltenses have become increasingly politicized around environmental issues, in part through the influence of the revolutionary Zapatista movement, which has ties with the communal representation of Milpa Alta, and also in response to the aforementioned Arco Sur highway project. Recently, university-affiliated members of Milpaltense society have been mobilizing against the privatization of water and against state violence in conjunction with wider national movements. In November 2015, they organized a one-day symposium with local artists, Mexico City-based academics from several universities, and Milpaltense representatives in Villa Milpa Alta titled, *Jornadas por la defensa de la tierra, el agua, la vida y la memoria* (Symposia for the defence of the earth, water, life and memory). According to the organizers, they were seeking to interweave “the experiences of farmers, indigenous people, civil society, universities, professionals, students, NGOs and interested people in general with the goal of linking them and developing integrated strategies to confront problems and construct alternatives and suggestions” (original in Spanish, my translation).

At the event, the anthropologist and historian, Armando Bartra, spoke of the need for Mexico City to preserve its rural areas and nature reserves, stating that every year, the state loses 1,000 hectares of agricultural land, edging ever closer to an “environmental catastrophe”. He also acknowledged that the proximity to the city has provided opportunities for Milpaltenses, such as the demand for *nopal* farming, and concluded that rural and city people must learn how to coexist. Conversely, a high-school teacher in the audience expressed a common view in blaming recent immigrants to the area for the degradation of Milpa Alta’s nature reserve, as they illegally create land parcels there and do not care about the landscape in the way Milpaltenses do. Thus, Bartra argued that Milpaltenses and city-dwellers need to build connections and mutual appreciation, whereas the teacher argued that Milpaltense interconnection with and conservation of the

environment depend on keeping outsiders away. All those present agreed, however, that environmental concerns and land rights should be central to Milpaltense politics.

The organizers also invited a *nabual*-shaman, in light of his considerable influence and close link to the current municipal administration of Milpa Alta. While the *nabual* emphasized that it is humans who belong to nature, rather than vice versa, and portrayed the landscape as sentient and sacred, this perspective was not shared by non-Milpaltense academics and activists. Thus, while Milpaltense environmental politics may include a concern for earth beings, this is not always the case, making it difficult to apply de la Cadena's (2015) notion of more-than-human politics. What this example does show is that Milpaltense activists seek to create an interlinked vision for all interested parties. It would be strategically disadvantageous to make their cosmological views explicit, as this would bring differences to the fore, when their objective is to forge strong alliances towards realising their goals in opposition to powerful economic interests (cf. Sierra 2001).



FIGURE 4: THE FOREST OF SAN MIGUEL

CONTESTED IDENTITIES

While some Milpaltenses strategically mobilise stereotypes about Indigenous people towards political ends, their lived realities evade essentialising classifications in their kaleidoscopic plurality, blending, twisting and code-switching, resulting in a dazzling multi-modality of cosmologies and subjectivities. Thus, it would be misleading to simply speak of a “hybrid culture” (García Canclini 1995) in Milpa Alta. For example, terms such as “syncretism” or “hybridity” are often used as shorthand to implicitly distinguish the autochthonous flair of global variants of Catholicism from its “infallible” centre in Rome (Mayblin, Norget, and Napolitano 2017: 7). In practice, the Church’s strategic theology of blending is itself combined with the creative contingencies of “will, responsiveness, environment, and happenstance” (ibid.: 11). Following a paternalistic, elaborate theology of “inculturation”, the Mexican Catholic Church incorporates “emblematic and non-specific” Indigenous symbols into its liturgical practice to ease religious teaching (Norget 2009: 342). Accordingly, the Catholic priest of Santa Ana Tlacotenco, Father Jesús, tolerates the ongoing veneration of Mother Earth and has reintroduced elements of Aztec thought and ritual, encompassing these by Catholic ideas and practices, and gives the Sunday evening Mass in Nahuatl (Whittaker 2016). Father Jesús is not a native speaker, so that some of Tlacotenco’s fluent speakers criticize his efforts, but others are proud to see Nahuatl conquer more public space back. As both sword and cross played an important role in the conquest of the Americas, early colonial churches, such as the church of Santa Ana Tlacotenco, were built atop pre-existing sites of religious veneration: in Tlacotenco’s case, over a pyramid, as Father Jesús confirmed (see fig. 5), and in Villa Milpa Alta, the church of the Virgin of the Ascension covers the mouths of three waterhole-caves (Losada 2007: 293). Yet some devout Catholic Milpaltenses would balk at the suggestion that Aztec deities are still being venerated in Milpa Alta, whereas others consider Aztec deities to be essentially the same as the Christian saints venerated in their place today. Many Milpaltenses also turn to “traditional medicine” for the cure of magical illnesses, such as *susto*, *mal de ojo*, and *pali* (Wacher 2006: 50). A much smaller group of what could be described as anti-colonial cultural revitalisation hardliners and Mexican nationalists reject Catholic practices entirely in favour of a New Age-influenced take on Aztec religion (cf. González Torres 1996). This religious plurality cannot be adequately folded into the idea of a single worldview or system of beliefs.

Much the same is true of Milpaltense ethnic identity, which is more complex, flexible, and dynamic than being simply Nahua or *mestizo* (mixed-race). In Mexico, *mestizaje* has been described as a “racial project” that was imposed “as the official national ideology since the Revolution of 1910” and “that is current and alive”, despite “post-racial politics [concealing] racial privilege and exclusion under the banner of racial mixing and multicultural recognition” (Moreno 2016: 516). Moreno cites a number of political controversies and statistics to debunk the common notion that all Mexicans are mestizos and racism therefore cannot exist (ibid.): For instance, lighter-skinned Mexicans have between two or three years more schooling than their darker-skinned peers (Telles 2014: 75), and over 40 % of the Indigenous population, but only 10 % of the non-Indigenous population, are extremely poor (CONEVAL 2012: 45). Following this trend, the perceived “Indigenous” space of Milpa Alta is Mexico City’s poorest municipality, with 48.8 % of the population being considered poor, of which half are extremely poor (Jaramillo 2015).



FIGURE 5: INCULTURATION: VIRGIN OF GUADALUPE STATUE ATOP AZTEC PYRAMID-SHAPED FOUNTAIN IN TLACOTENCO'S CHURCH COURTYARD. THE PYRAMID WAS COMMISSIONED BY PADRE JESUS.

Despite the apparent links between poverty, the municipality being underserved, and being identified as Indigenous, the Nahuatl language – a key marker of ethnic identity – is a great source of pride for the local elite:

as Nahuatl is a deeply threatened language in Santa Ana Tlacotenco, in Milpa Alta, the last enclave of Nahuatl in the Valley of Mexico, today, extreme purist groups have started a movement to revitalise and resurrect the language [...]. The authenticity of these speakers is linked to the purity of their language, as if were an “uncontaminated” blood quantum associated with the immaculate nature of the classical language (Flores Farfán 2009: 89)

Milpa Alta has only 4,000 self-identifying speakers of Nahuatl (Vergara 2016: 249), who differ in their pronunciation and level of comfort with linguistic innovation. Very few of the remaining 645 speakers of Nahuatl in Santa Ana Tlacotenco are under the age of 65 (*ibid.*), and some of my younger friends struggle to even pronounce Nahuatl words when asked to read one out. The vast majority of Milpaltenses are monolingual speakers of “Nahuatlised” Spanish, which contains many loan words and some grammatical features of Nahuatl, and some have knowledge of English and/or other European languages. The small Nahuatl-speaking elite devalues other variants of Nahuatl spoken in Milpa Alta, and often even in their own families (Flores Farfán 2009: 89), as they consider such variants to undermine their cultural authenticity. Instead, the elite looks to their illustrious network of Nahuatl Scholars at Mexican and foreign universities to legitimate their contested authenticity (*ibid.*). As one Nahuatl speaker expressed it, there are “two schools of thought (*corrientes*): that of the academics, and that of the village” (cit. in Joaquim 2014: 60). The elite’s powerful ties have enabled some of the putatively “best” speakers to mobilise funding for cultural projects, and to find prestigious employment as research assistants and educators. Yet there is disagreement about what constitutes linguistic purity. Both academics and non-academics may display purist tendencies, while placing their emphasis on different kinds of linguistic “contamination”: of Spanish influences or of borrowings from Classical Nahuatl. The following anecdote by a local scholar, who has written original poetry in Nahuatl and has been involved in translating colonial-period Nahuatl texts into Spanish illustrates this:

One time, when he was taking a walk in his hometown of Tlacotenco, an elderly woman shouted at him, “You, since you know Nahuatl, how does one say ‘teachers’ in

Nahuatl?” He responded in accordance with his purist language ideology: “*Temachtibqueh*.” Triumphantly, she proclaimed: “You’re teaching badly! It’s *temachtibquis!*” In her Hispanicised version of the word, the classical Nahuatl plural suffix *-queh* was replaced by merging of the singular suffix *-qui* with the Spanish plural suffix *-s*, to form *-quis*, as is commonly done in Milpaltense vernacular Nahuatl today. Attempting to keep his calm, the teacher invited the woman to his Nahuatl classes, which incensed her even more.

With the advent of liberal multiculturalist policies, Nahuatl speakers have gained so much local prestige, that a middle-aged Nahuatl learner, who had been researching his ancestry, expressed, “I was disappointed to find I have a lot of Spanish blood, I’d rather be Indigenous.” By contrast, many are wary of speaking Nahuatl because of past and present memories of discrimination. According to the Mexican historian and Indigenous studies scholar, Federico Navarrete, in Mexico, “the worst, though not the only, forms of racism are directed at Indigenous people and those people who appear to be such, as well as against people of African descent” (2016: 1, original in Spanish, my translation; cf. Moreno 2016). Strikingly, the word *indio* continues to be used as an insult in Mexican Spanish (Flores Farfán 2009: 150). In Milpa Alta, upper-class individuals often claim Spanish ancestry, the Nahuatl-speaking elite claims Aztec ancestry, while poor, Indigenous immigrants from other Mexican states are socially marginalised. Even within a family, lighter-skinned members are often identified as having more privilege or being more attractive than darker-skinned ones. For example, I was surprised to hear older women refer to a balding, pot-bellied, but light-skinned, doctor in his late fifties as a particularly handsome man. Similarly, in the local markets, you often hear potential customers being addressed as *güerito/a*, as a form of flattery. My 20-year-old friend Emiliano opined that his older brother is the handsome one because he is taller, leaner, and lighter-skinned. In these examples, the line is difficult to trace between attributed and actual difference, aesthetic preference and discrimination, blunt power and playful expression.

Often subject to racist anti-Indigenous discrimination in urban and institutional contexts, Milpaltenses do not refer to themselves as “Indigenous people” in most situations. The Mexico City government officially recognises Milpaltenses and members of other non-mestizo groups as *pueblos originarios*: those who have a privileged relationship with the land and have been native to it since before the founding of the current Mexican

State. Moreover, *originarios/as* are defined by “conserving [...] various traditional forms of social organisation through which they preserve their identity, their culture, their territory, and habitat” (*Propuesta del Acuerdo del Consejo de Consulta y Participación Indígena del Distrito Federal*, cit. in Medina Hernández 2007: 32). Beyond defending their claim to the land they occupy, identifying as *originarios* allows Milpaltenses to reject both historical discrimination against them and absorption into a pan-Mexican identity as *mestizos*, as López Caballero’s (2009) research describes in detail.

For some, being *originarios* is also a way of expressing their superiority over other Indigenous Mexican groups. This attitude stems from Milpaltenses having been identified as “heirs to the Aztecs” in classic ethnographies (e.g., Horcasitas 1979; van Zantwijk 1960) and from the Mexican state routinely exploiting Aztec names and symbols to claim historical legitimacy. For example, the name of the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan, is iconographically represented on the Mexican flag. In the process, the Aztecs become emblematic for all of Mexico, cast as common ancestors to mestizos and Milpaltenses alike, and are privileged over other cultures (cf. Lomnitz 2001: 37).

Thus in Mexico, we can distinguish between the majoritarian hegemonic Indigeneity associated with ancestral ties to the Aztec state and minoritarian counterhegemonic Indigenous groups that seek to defend or claim rights at a local level, very often *against* the state. Both notions of Indigeneity animate Milpaltense identitarian expression: Due to their privileged connection with the Aztecs being in tension with their underprivileged position vis-a-vis the Mexican state, the same Milpaltense person may be denigrated as an “*indio*” when in the city and proudly recite colonial-period Aztec poetry and dance in an Aztec costume on special occasions, while also defying the Mexican state when participating in the Indigenous Zapatista-influenced communal struggle, and complain about Indigenous immigrants from Oaxaca. This echoes Marisol de la Cadena’s observations in the rural Andes:

“in everyday, material life, both identities – Indian and mestizo – are acquired and lost through dynamic, conflictive processes rooted in implicit and established hierarchies, and legitimated by regional cultural norms. [...] Thus where the dominant elites would see only Indians in Chitapampa, Chitapampinos themselves behold sharp ethnic inequality in the community” (2014: 332).

One of the cultural revitalization groups I worked with, the *tlacuateras*, explained that they perform dances and sing in Nahuatl precisely to show that they are *not* “Indigenous”: to have *cultura* (culture) is to be cultured and is opposed to being an *indígena* (Indigenous person), which they associated with backwardness and poverty. Accordingly, it is more important for many Milpaltenses to claim Nahuatl pride – a certain social memory of, and privileged relationship with, Nahuatl – rather than to necessarily speak it. Yet the *tlacuateras* and other cultural groups do organise group trips to Nahuatl-speaking communities in Puebla, Morelos, and Guerrero, in recognition of their ancestral kinship ties. One time when I accompanied some friends to a market in Morelos, several women expressed embarrassment about their relative privilege compared to Morelenses, who had less access to water and jobs, and kept quiet about being from Milpa Alta.

The *tlacuateras*’ assertion that they were a *cultural* group, not an *Indigenous* one, revealed a certain ambivalence about “being Nahua”: a simultaneous rejection and recognition of a shared ethno-linguistic identity, which so many Native and non-Native scholars have written about (cf. Good Eshelman 2015b) and which marks them as Indigenous in ethnological terms. Ordinary Milpaltenses seldom refer to themselves as “Nahua” and may express discomfort with being compared to speakers of other Nahuatl dialects. Eschewing such labels, many understand themselves mainly through their ancestral, locally-specific cultural heritage and through their relations with the land and the other beings they live with. This is what many referred to as having “roots” (*raíz*), distinguishing themselves from “root-less” immigrants.²⁴ So, for the *tlacuateras*, like for many Milpaltenses and other Indigenous people, Indigeneity is not merely a matter of fixed identity, and it is more than a matter of strategic or opportunistic political and social “positioning” (Li 2000: 151). Crucially, Indigeneity is also often a matter of *refusal*: Like the *tlacuateras*, a *nahual*-shaman and several other Milpaltenses said that anthropologists, with their propensity for generalisations and labels, had failed to depict them accurately. There was a

range of possibilities available for political life, for identification and identity within and against recognition, all instantiated in refusals. There seemed,

²⁴ In West Mexico, *cultura* has similarly been described as denoting an elusive ideal blend of “cosmopolitanism”, in the sense of being well-travelled and well-educated, and “rootedness” in a particular place and history (Stack 2007).

rather, to be a “tripleness,” a “quadrupleness,” to consciousness and an endless play, and it went something like this: “I am me, I am what you think I am, and I am who this person to the right of me thinks I am, and you are all full of shit, and then maybe I will tell you to your face” and “Let me tell you who you are.” [...] There was something that seemed to reveal itself at the point of refusal—a stance, a principle, a historical narrative, and an *enjoyment in the reveal*. (Simpson 2017: 107, emphasis in the original)

As part of their struggle to defend their local mountains, Milpaltenses strategically invoked contrasting identities as *originarios* and as “Indigenous people.” The notion of refusal suggests that these divergent identifications are not only a matter of disagreement among Milpaltenses. By refusing to be unambiguously identified with Indigeneity while honouring their kinship with Morelenses, the *tlacualeras* refused being already known and knowable as Nahua, dislodging this analytic identifier. Native Studies scholar Andrea Smith considers refusal to be central to dismantling structures of coloniality, as ethnographic knowledge has often been employed “to apprehend, contain, and domesticate the potential power of Indigenous peoples to subvert the [colonialist] state” (2014: 231). Rather than being defined by Nahua culture and history, the *tlacualeras*’ uncertain identity left them open to new possibilities and relationships.

Interweaving

Indigeneity is thus a fuzzy category denoting multiple meanings for differently positioned people, including: a shared historical experience of colonisation; an umbrella category for diverse ethnic-cultural identities defined by ancestral heritage and cosmologies; an identity that local actors strategically claim or refuse in the context of multiculturalism and ethno-nationalism; an analytic term employed by researchers (often in tandem with ethnic adscriptions, such as “Nahua”); a racialized “minority” status within, or challenging, the nation-state (e.g. in Public Health contexts, cf. Smith-Oka 2013), and; a racist slur. When Milpaltenses and other Mexicans refer to “Indigeneity” in everyday speech, it is not always clear whether they are essentialising the category, or which meaning they are invoking – the boundaries can be clear or fluid, depending on the context. In light of this complexity, I argue that Milpaltense ethnicity, religion, and political subjectivities are more accurately modeled by the image of *interweaving*.

According to Ingold, lifeworlds are “tantamount to the ongoing, temporal interweaving of our lives with one another and with the manifold constituents of our environment” (2000: 348). The connection some Milpaltenses feel with their social and natural environment is not inevitably given, but actively cultivated. Theories of indiscriminate, existential “entanglement” or homogeneous visions of culture cannot account for the differences in the connections between humans and other beings and things – the differences in “what gets inside” and becomes part of the self (Roberts 2017). Weaving instead describes a practice of skilled, rhythmic repetition that operates within a field of forces that cuts across design, practitioner, and material (Ingold 2000: 342). Moreover, like learning a way of life, learning to weave is a profoundly social practice, as learners pay attention to both their own embodied actions and sensations and those of other learners and teachers around them (Csordas 1993: 139). The women at the Milpaltense back-strap-loom weaving workshop I participated in described their many motivations to me: wanting to connect with their ancestral Nahua heritage and other women, as well as experience the joy of learning a new skill, the challenge and privilege of mastering a highly-respected and increasingly rare craft, and the tactile satisfaction of making garments of one’s own design with one’s own hands for oneself, often featuring Milpaltense flora and fauna and mythic motifs. Some also highlighted that the repetitive motions of weaving were relaxing, providing an almost meditative escape from everyday stress. By meeting on a weekly basis and helping each other, the mostly female weavers soon became a tight-knit group. More than just a hobby or a line of work, weaving is a symbolic practice of great importance in Aztec philosophy (cf. Maffie 2014: 382-383) and in contemporary identity politics: Its continued existence aids Milpaltenses in legitimizing Indigeneity-based rights claims. Widening its application to social becoming and cultural production in general, I define *interweaving* as an ongoing, patterned practice of affectively harnessing relationships, material conditions, knowledge, and the imagination towards producing Milpaltense lifeworlds.

The heterogeneity of Milpaltense lifeworlds is mobilised in discourses of distinction. Milpaltenses often drew distinctions between “good” or “bad” culture, sometimes with disastrous consequences. A student of linguistics ran a Nahuatl competition with a group of native speakers and semi-speakers, which led to some speakers being praised, while others were shamed. This ranking of linguistic ability led the group to split, because at least a dozen “bad” speakers ceased to take part in Nahuatl-

related activities. Similarly, my interlocutors disagreed on the “right” or “healthy” way to take *temazcal* (Nahua sweat lodge) baths, on how to dress, weave, and dance “authentically”, or on whom should be regarded as the most “knowledgeable” and “trustworthy” person for me to interview about local customs. This fissioning is symptomatic of the high stakes surrounding revitalisation efforts, which include both material and immaterial interests, such as protecting rights claims and ancestral heritage, attracting tourists, and a revival of *Mexicayotl* (Nahua pride)²⁵ inspired by the Zapatista movement.

For example, one evening, Amparo, the leader of the *tlacualeras*, announced in a grave tone: “We have some things to clarify.” Refusing to be interrupted until she was finished with her speech, she said that she collected and shared songs and dances with the group, putting a lot of work into teaching these to us, and if we were unwilling, she would find new group members who still have “*valores culturales*” (cultural values). She explained that she regarded some group members having joined another group alongside the *tlacualeras* as a “*traición*” (betrayal). Then every *tlacualera* had to confirm that they still wanted to be in the group. I explained that as an anthropologist, I worked with many people and that it was simply my job to also spend time with other groups. This seemed to be accepted. Finally, with everyone having expressed their feelings, there was a sense of having cleared the air, but I discovered a few days later that one woman had been excluded from the group, which devastated her.

Given how poisonous the discourse around “good vs. bad” culture has proven in Milpa Alta, solutions to violence against women premised on distinguishing good customs from bad ones, or positive masculinities from “toxic” ones are likely to be divisive. Even those Milpaltenses who blame violence against women on machismo, widely viewed to be of Spanish origin, express diverse, and often ambivalent, attitudes towards it. Men and women do not always use *macho* in a contemptuous manner, but it may also refer to desirable qualities in a man. Depending on the context, a *macho* may denote a drunkard, or a man who can hold liquor; a man who easily flies off the handle, or one who can stand his ground; a womanizer, or a heartthrob (cf. Hunt 1975: 948). In addition, Gutmann

²⁵ Friedlander (2006) describes *Mexicayotl* as a Mexico City-based movement of “cultural extremists”, who want to purge Mexican culture of its Hispanic elements and return to its Aztec and Maya roots, which claimed to speak for the Indigenous population but was mainly led by white middle-class intellectuals and influenced by the Civil Rights movement in the US.

(2007) argued that Mexican masculinities have been changing, so that many young men do not identify with either aspect of machismo. Similarly, my young male interlocutors often engaged in typically “feminine” behaviours, such as cooking and child minding, and ascribed machismo more to their fathers than to themselves, even when they did exhibit machismo-like behaviours, such as going on a bender with their mates and getting into fights. Purging Milpa Alta of “bad” machismo seems impossible as long as it cannot be defined.



FIGURE 6: HELPING EACH OTHER AT THE WEAVING WORKSHOP IN VILLA MILPA ALTA

CONCLUSIONS

The stakes are high in Milpaltense identity politics, as retaining their communal territory depends on it. Milpaltenses often find themselves caught in a double bind of having to perform Indigeneity while wanting to transcend the discrimination that accompanies their perceived otherness. For instance, some may feel compelled to evoke stereotypical associations of Indigenous people as guardians of nature strategically, but their relationships with nature are only caring when they have worked on the relationship.

Accordingly, Milpaltenses move between presenting a united front against enemy interests and engaging in a highly complex politics of distinction within their own community. Rather than representing a unified “hybrid culture”, the image of “interweaving” captures the dynamic process by which Milpaltenses selectively create unity within multiplicity, following numerous patterns beyond the possibilities of ethnographic description.

2. Awkward Relationships

<i>Ibcuac oniyeya nichpocaton</i>	<i>And when I was a young girl</i>
<i>tlen notzupē tlen notomal</i>	<i>oh my meals, oh my tamales</i>
<i>ibcuac onimonamicti</i>	<i>and once I got married</i>
<i>za ce maololli ipan nocamac</i>	<i>only a fist in my mouth</i>

“Xochipitzabua” (Tlacotecan version
of the “Slender Flower” dance)

“Anthropologists treat cultures like fragile soap bubbles that mustn’t be disturbed,” the director of the Milpa Alta branch of Inmujeres, the National Institute for Women, told me conspiratorially. She had decided I was enough of a feminist to understand. Having previously worked as an anthropologist, this attitude of apologising for “cultural violence” led her to distance herself from the discipline, she explained. Willowy, curly-haired, light-skinned, and high-strung, she spoke of an entrenched machismo in this rural borough just south of Mexico City’s urban sprawl. She also highlighted some important women’s rights which are currently being violated in Milpa Alta, such as the right to nourishment, the right to identity, and the right to education: The poorest Milpaltenses only eat once a day and girls eat less than boys, getting the “*buesito*” (bone), while boys are served the *pechuga* (breast). Many girls, but also boys, do not have a birth certificate, without which they cannot exercise their rights as citizens. Many girls break off their studies because of an involuntary pregnancy. In the Inmujeres director’s view, marginality leads to gender inequality. She also criticised “traditionalist” women for “naturalising” violence and for living vicariously through the men in their lives. At the same time, she regretted feeling unable to reconcile her feminist values with most men’s expectations of relationships, in which she, so she implied, would have to play a subordinate role. Despite her solitude, she clung fiercely to those values, while admitting, “Being a feminist does not make your life easier.”

A number of problematic relationships pervade the vignette above, particularly the question whether the opposition between feminists, as defenders of women’s rights, and

anthropologists, as defenders of cultural rights, can be surmounted. When rights discourses seemingly collide, what can anthropology offer beyond a kind of “cultural relativism” that treats cultures as “soap bubbles”? Over the past two decades, this dichotomy has animated a growing body of literature on “women’s rights” versus “Indigenous rights” (Merry 2001; Nyamu 2000; Nagengast and Turner 1997). Notably, Indigenous women’s organisations frame violence in terms that diverge somewhat from the mainstream debate, as I will describe below. In Mexico, the question is further complicated by anthropologists’ considerable influence on the politics of gender and Indigeneity.²⁶

Even though many Milpaltenses do not self-identify as “Indigenous,” but as *originarios* instead, it is analytically useful to frame the following discussion in terms of Indigeneity, in recognition of the strong influence Indigenous rights movements continue to have on Milpaltense struggles and identity. Moreover, while the Inmujeres director did not use the term “Indigenous” when referring to Milpaltenses – instead speaking of rurality, marginality, and culture – she did compare them with Indigenous Oaxacans, which suggests that she perceived Milpaltenses as Indigenous people of a kind. Recall also that in Mexico, Indigenous languages, such as Nahuatl, are considered key markers of Indigeneity. Hence, Milpaltenses are frequently identified as Indigenous by cultural others, explicitly or implicitly, as well as by some members of their own community, alongside their many other social and political self-identifications (see Chapter 1, “Contested identities” for more detail).

In this chapter, I will summarise the wider “women’s rights” versus “Indigenous rights” debate as well as discuss how the politics and realities of contested Indigeneity intersect with violence against women and with the strategies that development organisations are employing to fight it. I will then focus specifically on Inmujeres’ work in Milpa Alta and how they seek to engage the public, with mixed results. I will argue that the “awkward relationship” (Strathern 1987) between global activist and ethnographic ways of approaching violence against women is highly complex, and not simply one of opposition in Milpa Alta.

²⁶ Indeed, one might argue that doing any kind of anthropological research on, or with, Indigenous Mexicans means already being deeply implicated in a complex politics of Indigeneity, both in positive and harmful ways (cf. Simpson 2017).

BEYOND THE GLOBAL AND THE LOCAL

As mentioned in the introduction, international organisations, such as the UN have played a crucial role in the global diffusion of the “violence against women” concept as a key human rights issue. This meant that intimate partner violence could no longer be considered a private matter, but became one for state action. The *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW), which was ratified by the Mexican Government in 1981, prompted most of the world’s governments to modify their legislation and public policies regarding women’s rights as well as sexual and reproductive rights accordingly (González Montes 2009: 170). In addition, the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence against Women, known as the *Belém do Pará Convention* (1994) was ratified by Mexico in 1998 (ibid.: 171).

However, the recognition of violence against women is a complex matter and has given rise to a number of controversies within the global activist landscape, including in Milpa Alta. As mentioned above, one such controversy regards whether women’s rights and multicultural rights are opposed. Another issue regards the reliability of violence against women statistics, which are highly politicised. The problem of statistics is related to the problem of definitions, which becomes clear in the example of the controversial category “femicide”. These examples will help to illuminate the development of feminism in Mexico City and of Inmujeres.

Women’s rights vs. multiculturalism and the Indigenous women’s critique

The Inmujeres’ director’s words reflect her experience of Mexican anthropology, which is enmeshed with the politics of Indigeneity in complex ways that I will only sketch here. In the 1970s, a time in which state-funded anthropological institutions multiplied (Lomnitz 1992: 260), anthropologists, perhaps unwittingly, supported the Mexican Government’s acculturation politics under the banner of *indigenismo*, a nationalist project of transforming Indigenous people into “modern” Mestizos (*mestizaje*) (Smith-Oka 2013: 34-40). After the Government endorsed the Convention 169 of the International Labour

Organisation in 1989, the political significance of a national anthropology was in decline (Lomnitz 1992: 261), and anthropologists were encouraged to embrace liberal multiculturalism and “show indigenous people how to govern themselves according to their own traditions [... such as by electing] tribal councils and becom[ing] guardians of their own cultures” (Friedlander 2006: 205). As a result, Mexican anthropologists have been accused of enabling racism by “keeping the Indians Indian” (ibid.: 204). Apparently echoing this view, the director’s words resonated with the liberal feminist political philosopher Susan Moller Okin’s (1997, 1999) classic argument that multiculturalism is bad for women because it apologises for cultural practices that do not treat “men and women as moral equals”, which was countered by the argument that Indigenous peoples have a right to full autonomy (Kymlicka 1997). While anthropologists’ penchant for multiculturalist and postmodernist critiques of universal rights formulations as well as limitations of the ethnographic method have contributed to the view that “anthropologists have been largely uninvolved in human rights formulations” (Messer 1993: 221), they have also played a key role in critiquing the assumptions underlying Okin’s argument.

One thread of criticism has focused on Okin’s liberal feminist standpoint, which attributes violence against women to culture or religion. Abu-Lughod (2013), Mohanty (2003), Volpp (2001), and many others, have undermined it by highlighting the importance of other factors, such as race, socio-economic status and geo-political context to women’s condition. Brown (2006: 198-199) exposed the colonial underpinnings of Okin’s argument by questioning the supposed superiority of Western liberalism vis-à-vis “barbaric cultures” on two grounds: the violence inherent to capitalist and imperialist systems as well as the idea that women’s wellbeing was necessarily conditional upon individual liberty. Similarly, the multiculturalist argument was criticised by Povinelli (2002), who demonstrated that liberal multiculturalism does not grant Indigenous people true autonomy but instead imposes its notions of authenticity on them. Paradoxically, despite multiculturalism being invented by secular liberal democratic worldviews, it has often been discussed as a danger to secular liberal democracies. More recently, Aune (2015) turned Okin’s argument on its head by showing that certain forms of secularism may also be bad for women, such as in France, where Muslim women have been banned from wearing face veils in public since 2011, making it harder for religious women to find

paid employment. Along similar lines, Newdick (2005) dissected the World Bank's narrative of Mexican Indigenous women as victims of their culture.

A second thread of criticism focused on the problematic assumptions at work in creating the division between women's rights and multicultural rights. The International Indigenous Women's Forum (2007) challenged the notion that cultures do not change and thus cannot accommodate or generate new ideas towards social change. For instance, Zapatista women in Chiapas hold rights to be "exclusively mutual" (Speed 2006: 214). They do not demand individual rights, such as women's rights as defined by the UN, because they cannot separate their experience as individuals from that of the collective. Yet their refusal to align themselves with either Indigenous movements or women's movements risks isolating Indigenous women (Richards 2005).

A further critique might be levelled against both Okin's feminist and Kymlicka's multiculturalist argument that culturally "other" women need saving (cf. Abu-Lughod 2013): Following Okin's logic, Milpaltense women need saving from "culturally violent" men, and Kymlicka's reasoning appears to suggest that Milpaltense culture needs saving from the dominant culture of Mexico City. In either case, Milpaltense women are cast as victims, and their potential "saviours", such as Inmujeres workers, sympathetic politicians, activists, linguists, or anthropologists, are often external to their context (cf. Mutua 2001). Mexican Indigenous women's rights activists have instead been portrayed as seeking supporters in a struggle they are fighting themselves: To quote Comandanta Esther, a leading figure of the Zapatista Army in Chiapas, which has ties to Milpaltense leaders and influences their politics of struggle, "Women who are not indigenous also suffer. That is why we are inviting all of them to fight, so that we will not continue suffering" (cit. in Speed 2006: 208). Yet does this attitude also apply to Milpaltense women? And what exactly is Inmujeres seeking to save Milpaltense women from?

Violence against women in Mexico and Milpa Alta

When 17-year-old Teresa disappeared without a trace, her friends feared for the worst. Posters of missing girls line the entrances to Villa Milpa Alta's covered market. Milpa Alta shares a border with the State of Mexico, where 1,238 women and girls were reported missing in 2011 and 2012 (Lakhani 2015). Of these, 53% were girls of Teresa's age or

younger. The International Organization for Migration estimates that each year, 20,000 people are trafficked in Mexico, of which the majority are forced into prostitution (ibid.). Fortunately, Teresa had only run away from home, but many more cases remain unsolved.

According to the statistics, Milpaltense women are exposed to considerable levels of violence. Despite of decades of anthropology-informed state feminism in Mexico City, as represented by Inmujeres, and progressive legislation, such as the 2008 *Ley de las Mujeres para una Vida sin Violencia del Distrito Federal* (Women's Law for a Life without Violence of the Federal District), two thirds of Milpaltense women say they have experienced domestic violence, defined as physical or emotional violence (Coloca 2013: 17). Globally, Mexico has made headlines with the Ciudad Juárez femicides, where 379 women or more were murdered between 1993 and 2005 near the US border (Merry 2009: 120-125). Countrywide, more than 6,000 femicides were recorded by the Commission on Femicidal Violence in the Mexican Republic between 1999 and 2005 (Lagarde 2008: 219). According to the Civic National Femicide Observatory (*Observatorio Ciudadano Nacional del Femicidio*, OCNF) in Mexico, an average of one woman was killed every two days in Mexico City between November 2016 and May 2017 (Gómez Flores 2017). Within Mexico City, Milpa Alta was the borough recording the second highest rate of femicides per inhabitant after Iztapalapa at the time of my fieldwork, according to the Inmujeres director. Notably, Iztapalapa and Milpa Alta are the municipalities with the highest proportion of Indigenous inhabitants, leading some observers to associate Indigeneity with gender violence. This may partially explain why the Inmujeres director referred to Milpaltense “cultural violence,” despite being aware of factors, such as racism, deprivation, and marginality, affecting the likelihood of experiencing violence.

Femicide statistics are designed to shock, as feminist activists rely on galvanising governments and the global public into action. Yet the calculations behind the numbers are often dodgy and inconsistent. The Mexican Commission for Human Rights (CNDH) is the source cited by reports of an average seven femicides per day (Olivares 2017, Jiménez 2017), but CNDH representatives have only provided verbal statements on this, and have not published the numbers they have been working with. It is often unclear why particular timeframes are chosen or what exactly is being counted: “The statistics are a political football. For the social movement that has developed focusing on Ciudad Juárez, high numbers justify a sense of crisis so that activists develop their own, higher, counts,

while government officials eager to downplay the problem probably minimize the number of femicides” (Telesca, cit. in Merry 2009: 121). Similarly, Inmujeres has an interest in presenting high numbers to justify its existence and continue securing government funds to fight violence against women. Though the director promised to send me statistics on violence against women in Milpa Alta, and I reminded her of it multiple times, I was not provided access to this data.

In November 2014, I had attended an Inmujeres presentation of a survey on attitudes towards violence against women they had conducted in Milpa Alta. On most slides, raw numbers, rather than percentages, were presented to the audience and the dataset was noisy, as participants were volunteers, rather than a representative sample of the population. The majority of volunteers were women and some *pueblos* had far more participants than others. While no robust interpretations can be made from such data, it is perhaps worth noting that 38 % of respondents indicated that there had been physical violence in their homes. Of these, 40 % reportedly indicated that they were not interested in preventive measures, such as information campaigns (see fig. 7).²⁷

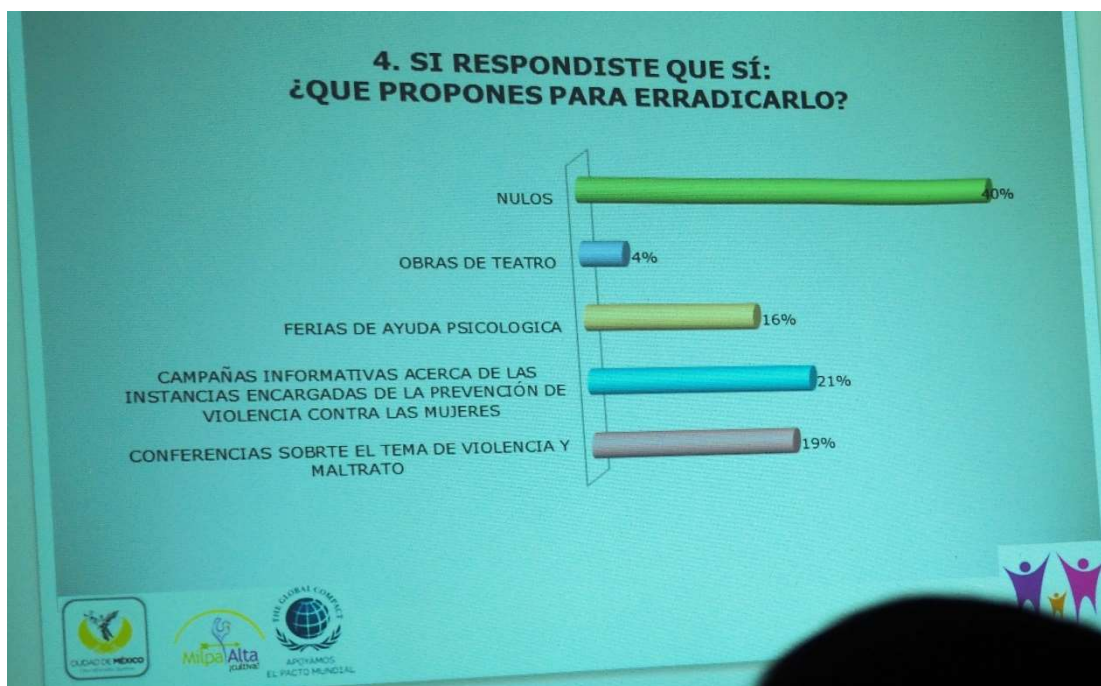


FIGURE 7: INMUJERES MILPA ALTA SURVEY PRESENTATION SLIDE: RESULTS FOR THE QUESTION, “IF YOU ANSWERED [THAT THERE HAS BEEN PHYSICAL VIOLENCE IN YOUR HOME], WHAT [MEASURES] DO YOU SUGGEST FOR ERADICATING IT?”

²⁷ The available answers were: “Nothing”, “plays”, “psychological support fairs”, “information campaigns regarding the prevention of violence against women”, and “conferences on the subject of violence and abuse” (see fig. 7).

However unreliable, the statistics, combined with her personal experiences in Milpa Alta, had certainly left an impression on the Inmujeres director herself. She told me that she was once followed by a young man who was calling her “*chinita*” (curly-head) after dark. She ran into a shop and the woman told her to relax and that they would accompany her home. She also mentioned several cases of femicide in Milpa Alta, including a man who killed his family, and another man who killed his grandmother and sister. Because she did not feel safe as a single woman in Milpa Alta, she preferred to live in Coyoacán (a largely middle-class borough of Mexico City) and drive into Milpa Alta for work, accepting the long commutes of two or three hours each way.

Though sweeping statements about violence against women are common, the dataset is noisy. Contrary to its femicidal image, Mexico currently ranks 76th out of 153 countries on the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security Index, which is an average result, also compared with other Latin American and Caribbean countries. Within the country group, it records the lowest levels of Lifetime Intimate Partner Violence at 14 %, but the highest level of organized violence at 1.1 deaths per 100.000 people (ibid.). A survey of violence against women in Milpa Alta found that 66.7 % of female respondents were suffering severe “domestic violence”, but this mainly refers to verbal abuse, such as name-calling, being told to shut up, that everything is their fault, and that they are just imagining things (Coloca 2013: 17-18). For instance, my friend Lizbeth commented that it is not acceptable for a husband to call his wife “*mi vieja*” (my old lady), expressing concern for her friend’s marriage. Like Leona, she considered respect a key value in keeping a person’s virtue and marriage intact. Others, like Estrella, described verbal abuse as a form of severe violence, as it is associated with a lack of respect. Importantly, respect is highly valued in Milpaltense society, and especially prized among Nahuatl-speakers. Elderly couples address their spouse as “*usted*,” thus using the polite, rather than familiar, form.

Respect and politeness also features prominently in the ethnography of Nahua peoples (e.g., González Montes 2015: 298-304; Good Eshelman 2015a), yet it rarely features in other studies of violence against women, so that these results cannot be compared with other contexts. For example, the British Crime Survey concluded that an estimated 45 % of women have experienced domestic violence (including threats of violence), sexual assault and stalking in their lifetime, compared to 26 % of men (Walby

and Allen 2004). If verbal abuse had also been counted, the numbers would likely have been much higher. Given the problems of quantifying violence against women, Inmujeres values ethnographic data for gaining more robust insights, explaining their frequent collaborations with ethnographers.

Femicide

While naming a problem may be essential to fighting it, the category of femicide encapsulates the problems associated with naming and combating violence against women. According to the World Health Organisation (2012),

Femicide differs from male homicide in specific ways. For example, most cases of femicide are committed by partners or ex-partners, and involve ongoing abuse in the home, threats or intimidation, sexual violence or situations where women have less power or fewer resources than their partner.

Marcela Lagarde, who is also a prominent politician and activist, is credited with introducing Diana Russell and Jill Radford's (1992) concept of femicide as the gender-based murder of women and girls to Latin American audiences. In the process, Lagarde redefined *feminicidio* as the combination of violent misogynist acts against women, which violate their human rights and culminate in their killing, which is allowed by the state, or happens with impunity, therefore constituting "*un crimen de Estado*" – a crime of the state (2008: 235).

Although femicide was included in the 2007 *Ley General de Acceso a las Mujeres a una Vida Libre de Violencia* (General Law for Women's Access to a Life Free of Violence) and is therefore a legal category in Mexico, it is not often employed by the authorities, nor was it used in the everyday speech of ordinary Milpaltenses. Compiling the tally of femicides falls to feminist civic organisations, such as the OCNF, and social scientists. At the time of my research, the murder of a 30-year-old Tlacotencan mother was not officially classified as a femicide, although it fulfilled the characteristics of sexual violence and humiliation. In other cases, it is even more difficult to ascertain whether the gender of the

victim played a role in their killing. Critics of “femicide” take exception to the lack of a corresponding category of gender-based homicide for men (Merry 2009: 121), especially given that far more men than women die by homicide, and Indigenous or gay men may also be feminized in their murder (cf. Stephen 2000). Regardless, *feminicidio* is a powerful concept, as graffiti of the activist slogans “*Ni una más*” (Not one [woman] more) and “*Vivas nos queremos*” (We want us alive) testify across Latin America.

INMUJERES

Inmujeres is a federal institution with branches in each municipality of Mexico City tasked with implementing the national policy on “end[ing] violence and discrimination against women, allow[ing] women to fully exercise their rights, ensur[ing] gender equality throughout all government agencies, and provid[ing] women with equal opportunities for participation in politics and the economy” (APEC n.d.). For instance, it “provides access to business services for women entrepreneurs” (ibid.). While Inmujeres is Mexico’s National Institute for Women, and lends its name to Mexico City-based branches, other Mexican states have their own version, such as ISMujeres (Institute for Sinaloense Women) for the state of Sonora. This reflects the heterogeneous landscape of women’s rights in Mexico. Whereas Mexico City is known for its progressive policies, the rest of the country is far more conservative. For example, selective abortion and gay marriage are legal only in Mexico City. Accordingly, Mexico City-based feminists have been accused of pushing their own urban middle-class feminist agenda at the cost of expanding the government’s reach over the reproductive bodies and behaviours of poor, rural women, who are the primary users of public health services (Singer 2017).

Unlike other parts of Mexico, in urban Mexico City, feminism is highly visible in academic, political, and public spaces. The anthropologist and Mexico’s leading expert on women and development, Lourdes Arizpe’s (1990), numerous accolades include having been Assistant Director-General for Culture of the UNESCO. Another of Mexico’s leading feminists is Marta Lamas, who has edited one of the key Latin American feminist journals, *Debate Feminista* (feminist debate), and was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of her successful lobbying for the legalisation of abortion in Mexico City

and copious academic achievements (2001, 2005, 2011, 2014). There is also an entire museum dedicated to the achievements of Mexican women and feminism in Mexico City, the *Museo de la Mujer* (Women's Museum, see Galeana n.d.). International Women's Day (8 March) is accompanied by feminist events, women's rights rallies, and celebrated across Mexico City. For instance, the US-Mexican pop star Lila Downs, a trained anthropologist who boasts Mixtec roots and sings in various Indigenous Mexican languages, gave a free Women's Day concert in the Mexico City municipality of Tlahuac in 2015.

As a community on the outskirts of Mexico City, Milpa Alta constitutes a liminal space between the liberal politics of the city and conservative Catholic-influenced morality. To promote women's rights and gender equality in Indigenous and rural communities, Inmujeres relies on collaboration with anthropologists. For this reason, it is no coincidence that the Inmujeres director in Milpa Alta was an anthropology graduate. Similarly, Gilda Salazar (2007) has directly collaborated with Inmujeres to study Indigenous women's struggles in Sonora.

Inmujeres and UAPVIF in Milpa Alta

The Milpaltense branch of Inmujeres was given the Nahuatl name "*Cibuah in call?*" (Women's house) and is located in the centre of Villa Milpa Alta, over the main market. The entrance to the street is inconspicuous and shared by a doctor's office. Turning the corner and going up the stairs, I finally saw the Inmujeres posters, showing me that I was in the right place. Upon entering the branch, visitors go to the registration desk, where I saw a friendly female police officer in her mid-40s seated, knitting purple socks for her granddaughter. She explained to me that her presence is needed, as it occasionally happens that angry (ex-)partners follow women to Inmujeres and make a scene.

To prevent violence against women and help those who experienced it, Inmujeres offers women individual psychological and juridical sessions, psychological group therapy, discussion groups for a life without violence, information sessions on women's human rights, including their sexual and reproductive rights, workshops for female job-seekers, courses on personal and professional development, and job training. Via Inmujeres, Milpaltense women have been trained to become plumbers, electricians, blacksmiths, educational assistants, saleswomen, secretaries, administrators, accountants, and

dressmakers. As one worker explained to me, Inmujeres normally encourages women to train in male-dominated professions, such as plumbing, but the Milpaltense branch adapted to local women's demand for feminine professions, such as dressmaking. Moreover, every few months, Inmujeres announces workshops to help women become self-employed as entrepreneurs, bakers, seamstresses, rabbit breeders, and craftswomen. As long as places are available, the only condition women have to fulfil in order to participate is show and provide copies of their documentation: their birth certificate, proof of place of residence, certificates of previous studies, their voting credentials, and their *Clave Única de Registro de Población* (CURP), a unique identity code for citizens and residents of Mexico. For some Milpaltense women, this condition presents an insurmountable barrier: As the Inmujeres director herself noted, many women do not have a birth certificate, as they were never registered as infants. Unfortunately, as a federal agency, Inmujeres is legally bound to certain standards of accountability.

However, Inmujeres events are usually open to all, and include book presentations on relevant topics, such as female guerrilla fighters, and screenings of films addressing feminist themes, such as *Sufragette* and *Frida*. Inmujeres also organises activities on particular days of the year, on which women's struggles are celebrated internationally and commemorated by the UN: Women's Day on 8 March, the 16 days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence, starting on the Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women on 25 November, Housework Day on 22 July, and Rural Women's Day on 15 October. Such events typically involve talks by invited speakers, including politicians, activists, and scholars, and artistic performances or exhibitions. Moreover, Inmujeres runs elective courses on healthy relationships for *preparatoria* (highschool) students.

Complementary services are offered by the Milpaltense Unit for Attention and Prevention of Familial Violence (*Unidad de Atención y Prevención a la Violencia Familiar*, UAPVIF), a federal agency dedicated to fighting domestic violence. However, UAPVIF specialises on prevention, rather than offering support in the aftermath of violence. Moreover, as it focuses on violence in the family unit, there is a large overlap in terms of the violences addressed, but also considerable differences to Inmujeres' woman-focused feminist mission. The local UAPVIF branch, located by the highway near the entrance of Villa Milpa Alta, is directed by a Milpaltense woman in her 30s who neither described women as victims in our interview, nor did she view violence as a specifically

“Indigenous” or “cultural” phenomenon. Indeed, instead of emphasising Milpaltense women’s victimhood, she instead subscribed to the “strong woman” narrative exemplified by Leona in the Introduction: a general preparedness to work hard and deal with adversity, which is partially grounded in what Good Eshelman refers to as “Nahua cultural logic,” and what I refer to as cosmology. It is also grounded in Zapatista and other Mexican Indigenous movements’ ideology of struggle as well as feminist notions of resistance and resilience. (I will expand on the topic of strong womanhood in Chapter 4.) While feminist ideas have great influence in Mexico City, its influence is often mediated through local representations. Therefore, it is mainly Inmujeres and some university-educated individuals who directly promote international feminist ideas towards ending violence against women in Milpa Alta.

Six types of violence

In October 2014, I asked a Milpaltense social worker at the Inmujeres *Cibuaab in calli* centre what definition of violence they employ, and she explained that for many women, the Inmujeres group is their first contact with the idea of domestic violence as a solvable problem. Officially, Inmujeres distinguish six different kinds of violence against women: psycho-emotional, physical, patrimonial, economic, communitarian, and sexual violence. According to a leaflet distributed by Inmujeres in Milpa Alta at the time of my research (see fig. 8), psycho-emotional violence refers to controlling, ridiculing, and belittling actions; physical violence includes undesired “erotic” biting and scratching; patrimonial violence means breaking personal objects and asking for bank account PINs; economic violence refers to exploitation; communitarian violence includes catcalling (which is highlighted in red as a form of sexual violence, and thus a punishable offence in certain cases), groping, and other actions making women feel unsafe in the streets; and sexual violence includes emotionally blackmailing women into having sex. Few countries in the world recognise as many kinds of violence as Mexico.²⁸

²⁸ For example, the Scottish Government (n. d.) mainly focuses on physical, sexual and psychological violence, and harassment, but not patrimonial and economic violence (except for commercial sexual exploitation) as forms of violence against women and girls.

Existen diferentes tipos de violencias...

1 PSICOEMOCIONAL

- ¡Controla la forma en que te vistes!
- Elige a tus amistades
- Te ridiculiza y descalifica tus decisiones



FÍSICA 2

- Te muerde al besarte, eso no te agrada
- Te pellizca y pega "jugando"
- Jala tu cabello, te empuja y rasguña "sin querer"



3 PATRIMONIAL

- Ha roto tu celular u objetos personales
- Te pide las contraseñas de tus cuentas electrónicas



ECONÓMICA 4

- Cuando salen tú debes pagar la cuenta
- Te pide regalos muy costosos
- Te pide constantemente cubrir sus gastos
- Controla tus gastos



5 COMUNITARIA

Chiflidos, albures, piropos no solicitados, acercamientos indeseados, tocamientos en el transporte público que no te dejan caminar, vestirse o sentirte libre por la calle, son violencia sexual comunitaria

¡El piropo es acoso y el acoso es violencia sexual!



SEXUAL 6

- Demuéstrame que me quieres, dame la "prueba de amor"
- Te hace tocamientos y eso te incomoda
- Te ha forzado a hacer con tu cuerpo, cosas que te han desagradado



FIGURE 8: INMUJERES LEAFLET FOR THE PREVENTION OF INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE, "PLACER ES... LIBRES DE VIOLENCIA" (PLEASURE IS... VIOLENCE-FREE)".

Several of these types of violence are demonstrated to Milpaltense middle school pupils, for instance, via role play, such as one that I watched on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women (25 November) activities in Villa Milpa Alta: A man spins his girlfriend around, saying, “*te vas a casar conmigo, ¿no?*” (you will marry me, right?), but he has another woman on the side. He also borrows money from his girlfriend, saying “I will pay you, but don’t question me”. He forbids her to go out with her classmate, takes her phone and reads the texts, says he is “killing” himself with work to secure a future for them while she is out with her “*amigotes*” (chums, but somewhat pejorative). The argument escalates and he slaps her, she flees, pushing him back. He later realises that the other woman does not care for him the way his girlfriend did, so he asks his ex-girlfriend for forgiveness. She explains to him that what he did is violence against women and that there are institutions that can support men and women with these problems. After the play, the man stated that “we cannot remain silent” because this kind of violence is visible in secondary schools, but is not denounced. Notably, there was nothing specifically Milpaltense about the play’s scenario – it could have been set anywhere in Mexico.

In practice, Inmujeres workers prioritise the types of violence which they consider the biggest problems in women's lives, instead of focusing on all six types of violence. While we were chatting at the weaving workshop, I asked a Milpaltense Inmujeres worker if the women they worked with generally agree with Inmujeres’ definition of violence and she said “kind of...”: Inmujeres workers are given a definition of violence, and run all of Inmujeres branches according to the same principles across the Federal District. But she said that what might be considered subtler kinds of violence, such as catcalling and everyday sexism, were not actually the object of Inmujeres’ work. Instead they used a simplistic definition of domestic violence as physical violence (such as wife-beating, scratching, lashing) in order to avoid confusing women with unfamiliar concepts. An interview with the Vulnerable Groups representative of the Municipal Government echoed Inmujeres’ claim that the concept of violence is “unclear” in the population. Because there is overlap, as well as divergences and slippages between activist and local concepts of violence, anti-violence efforts dedicate time to educating people on what violence is in an attempt to “fix” its meaning. However, he claimed that, while physical violence against women occurs no more frequently than elsewhere in Mexico, there is more psychological and emotional violence towards women in Milpa Alta. Here we are

again reminded of the local, Nahuatl-specific importance of respect, which varies between Milpaltenses and is not addressed in Inmujeres' interventions.

Self-love, silence, and empowerment

For Inmujeres, violence and gender inequality threatens healthy, independent self-love. As the Inmujeres director said, she preferred being a single mother to being in a relationship, in which she would have to compromise her feminist ideals. Accordingly, the Facebook page of the Milpaltense branch of Inmujeres shared an image created by their sister organisation, ISMujeres on the occasion of Valentine's Day 2016, featuring a child-like drawing of a rosy-cheeked, smiling, cis-gender white brunette in a cute red dress holding hands with her mirror image before a pink backdrop of hearts, surrounded by a legend in all caps, "May your first love be... the love of yourself: Love yourself! Value yourself! Accept yourself!" (see fig. 9). Self-love, self-esteem, and body positivity (i.e. the appreciation of all kinds of bodies) have long been staples of feminist discourses worldwide (hooks 2000; Bordo 1993).

Notably, Inmujeres' discourse on love excludes the possibility of violence. A leaflet the Inmujeres' director gave me was titled, "*¿Qué es el amor?*" (What is love?) on one side, and "*¿Qué NO es el amor?*" (What is love NOT?) on the other (see figs. 10-11). Love was described as an emotion which combines desire, "non-violent" affection, and friendship. Readers are warned not to confuse love and being in love, and to remember that people can fall in love many times in life, so that they should not make a commitment too early, as "there are many people and things to experience, get to know, enjoy, feel." Regarding sex, it stated: "Every young person has to think, *choose, and decide* on the basis of their rights, always responsibly and consensually [...], and have the necessary maturity to make themselves responsible of the consequences of your decision" (my translation, emphasis in the original). The bottom line, added in a speech bubble, read: "Your happiness depends on you, not on other people." On the other side, non-love described demeaning, controlling, and other examples of violent behaviours. Here, the conclusion was, "Love does not hurt, it does not humiliate, it does not injure, it does not blackmail, it does not denigrate, it does not objectify." Some young Milpaltense feminists, such as

Jenny, occasionally share memes with similar definitions of love and non-love on social media.



FIGURE 9: INTERNET MEME OF THE INSTITUTO SONORENSE DE LAS MUJERES, SHARED ON THE INMUJERES MILPA ALTA FACEBOOK PAGE.

When I mentioned that I was interested in the specific situation of the Milpaltense woman, several interlocutors suggested that I should read *Gritos y susurros de las mujeres milpaltenses* (Screams and whispers of the Milpaltense women). This 276-page volume on women’s “experiences, woes, failures and triumphs” (Cervantes 2008: 19, my translation), was published on the occasion of the International Women’s Day events, from 4 to 7 March 2008, as a joint initiative of the municipal government and Inmujeres. The idea, as expressed in the book’s introduction, was to give “the Milpaltense woman” a space to “be heard and share her experiences” (ibid.) and to “break the silence” (ibid.: 13). To compile the 82 women’s stories featured in the volume, Inmujeres ran a writing competition. The winner of the competition, *El agua milagrosa* (“The miraculous water”), affirmed boldly

that “the ideal state for a woman is to be a ‘single mother’” (González 2008: 31). Citing the example of a woman who would keep water in her mouth whenever her husband came back from work, so as to remain silent “because dinner-time was always a time of quarrel and at the end there would be blows (*terminaban hasta a golpes*)”, the author, María Isabel González, concluded in the name of all women in Milpa Alta that “we are accumulating all these silences within us” (ibid.: 22). She reported leaving her bad marriage and asserted defiantly that, with or without a husband, women are the hub of their families.

However, for some women, loving themselves and breaking their silence is not an option they have or even want. Bety, a stout sextuagenarian I had spent many mirthful evenings singing and dancing together with at the *tlacuahera* meetings, fell silent before our interview could even take off. Talking about her life was too difficult for her. From other women’s and some of her own previous comments, I already knew she was illiterate, poor, and the widow of an abusive husband. Silence may be a sign of a woman’s agentic hiding of pain. Not to recognise such embodied or verbal affirmations of pain is to become complicit in the violence that caused it (Das 2007: 55-57). I cannot be sure why Bety stopped talking on that occasion, but her silent story matters and complicates Inmujeres’ do-it-yourself toolkit approach to empowering women.

Thus, solutions to violence against women are as problematic as the statistics and terms mobilised to define the problem. In Latin America and beyond, feminist activism frequently invokes the notion of “empowerment”. For instance, UN Women was established in 2010 as the “UN organization dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women”. By empowerment, the UN refers to women’s free and equal participation in all areas of life, including leadership, business, and political negotiations. As a seasoned former Programme Specialist for the Latin American and Caribbean section at UN Women admitted to me during a Q & A at a forum for Reducing Gender Inequality in Latin America at the University of Edinburgh (13 February 2018), the UN mainly encourages governments to invest in women’s advancement, as international funding is concentrated on eliminating cultural practices considered particularly urgent and severe, such as female genital cutting and child marriage. She said that, therefore, in practice, efforts to combat violence against women in Latin America are underfunded.

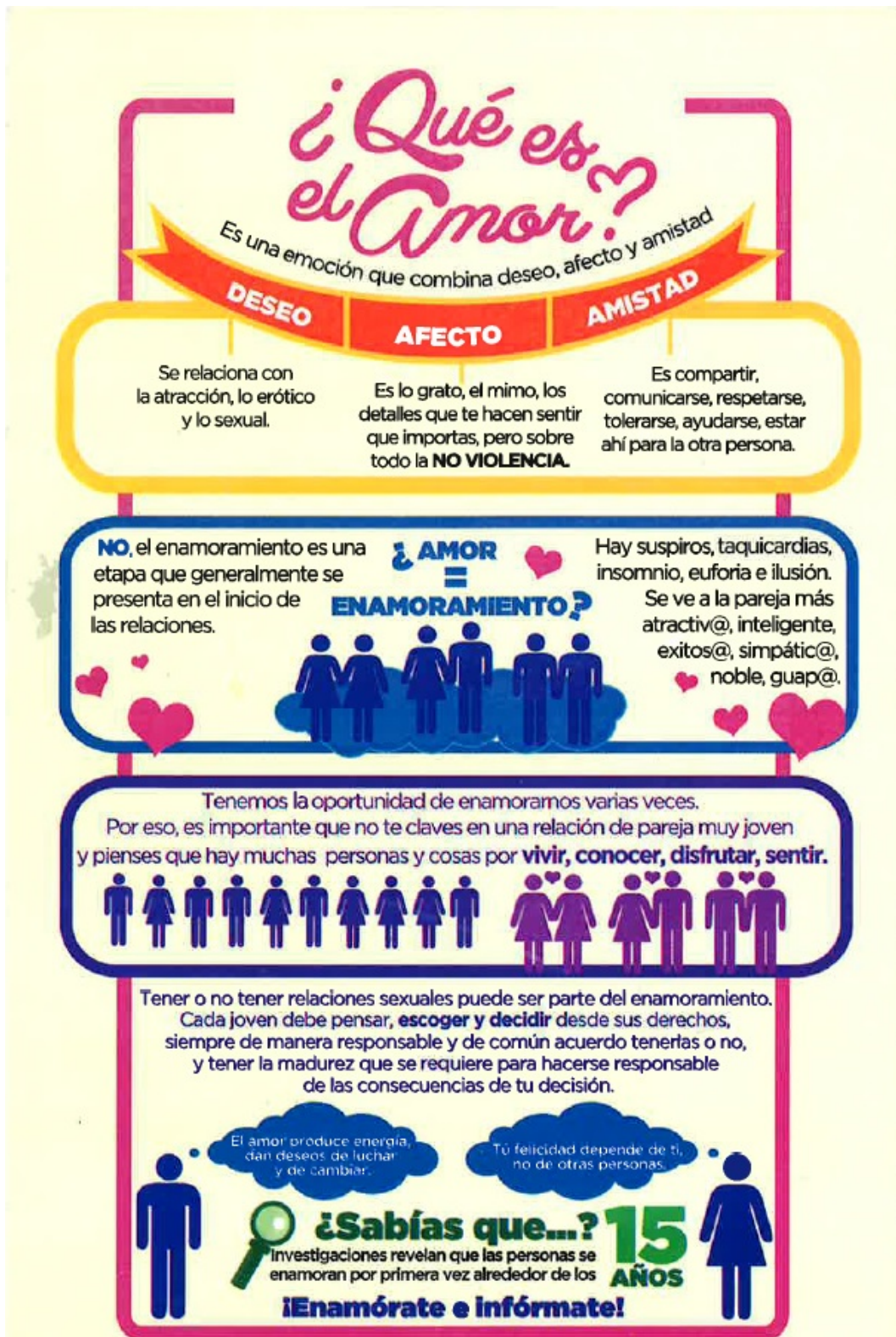


FIGURE 10: INMUJERES LEAFLET ON WHAT LOVE IS

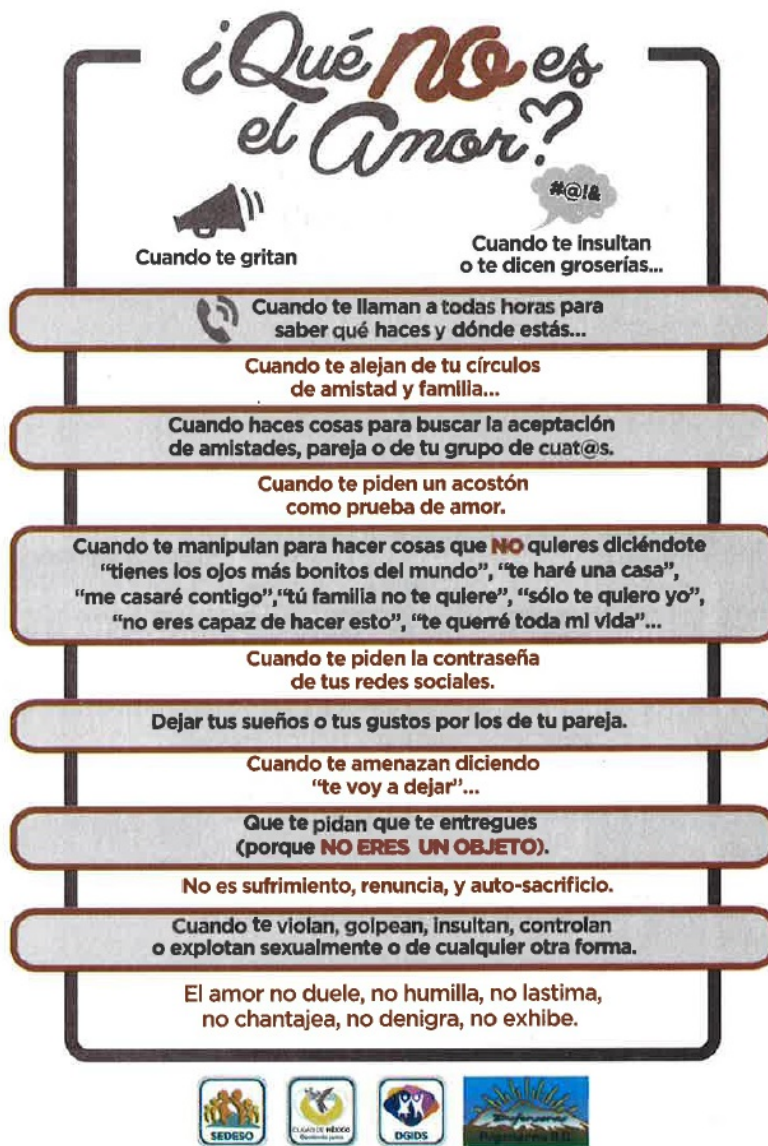


FIGURE 11: INMUJERES LEAFLET ON WHAT LOVE IS NOT

A young male representative for the International Society of Ultrasound in Obstetrics and Gynaecology (ISUOG) claimed at the same event that role models are the key to women's empowerment because scholarships are wasted on women who do not believe in their own potential. Therefore, I suggest that the burden of empowerment is placed on those seeking it: Abused women are encouraged to "love themselves", "break their silence", and emulate role models.

This certainly applies to Inmujeres in Milpa Alta. As one employee explained to me, Inmujeres do not advertise their services widely because there is a limit to how many

women they can provide substantive assistance to. As a result, fairly few women seek Inmujeres' services. I am not privy to the numbers, but was told that their group therapy sessions are often underattended. Yet Inmujeres workers console themselves with the knowledge that, "Even if we change only five women's lives, we have been successful." This certainly makes emotional sense, but one has to wonder if there are not more effective ways of employing Inmujeres' resources toward supporting Milpaltense women.

"Cultural violence"

The Inmujeres director said she previously ran workshops in other Mexican states. She was particularly moved by one occasion in Oaxaca, when a group of Indigenous women met her and her colleague at the entrance to their village, honouring their visit by putting several necklaces of *cempasuchitl* flowers around their necks. Intoxicated by the overpowering scent of the flowers, the two were pushed to lead the women's procession to the village centre, where the workshop would take place. There, a 13-year-old girl, speaking in her language, declared that she should have the right to speak. She did not mean the right to Free Speech, the Inmujeres director clarified. Rather, the girl meant the right to speak and for her opinions to be respected at home. She went on to describe her life as one of oppression, in which she was expected to listen and stay quiet.

For the Inmujeres director, this experience enshrined her duty to promote women's rights as a mandate bestowed on her by Indigenous women themselves. She did not consider Milpaltense women to be particularly different from those she met in Oaxaca – she viewed both as victims of "cultural violence" in the sense that members of their community cited culture as an excuse to limit their ability to speak, eat, move, and thrive in general. Yet when she spoke about Milpaltense machismo with a native sociologist, a middle-class Nahuatl speaker in his 40s, he claimed that she was misinterpreting things. For instance, if a man walks ahead of his wife, while she carries a load of wood on her back, it does not mean that she is oppressed. Rather, he insisted, it is a matter of role division, as the husband is looking out for snakes, ready to risk his life and strike to protect his wife. Unimpressed with this justification, the Inmujeres director viewed such claims as pure rhetoric, which glossed over the normalisation of violence in Milpa Alta and beyond.

She was not the only one to speak of “cultural violence”. When I interviewed Roberto, a librarian in his late 50s, he used the term without prompting in order to describe the situation of Milpaltense women, saying that domestic violence was common. However, it is possible that he had an interest in portraying gender inequality as something normalised, in light of his personal situation. He and his wife had violent fights at the beginning of their marriage, which eventually became more harmonious after a process of “mutual taming.” However, he remained dissatisfied with his marriage, as he considered his sexual needs to be unmet and took a lover. From his flirtatious conduct towards me, I could tell he was a womaniser.

Thus, speaking of “cultural violence” against women, or denying its existence, is a matter spanning global women’s rights politics as well as intimate moral negotiations. For the Inmujeres director, the term articulated her mission in Milpa Alta, and for the linguist, the term potentially represented an opportunity to justify his own behaviour, whereas for the sociologist, it articulated negative stereotypes about Indigenous people and obscured the local gendered division of labour. However, “cultural violence” was a term only used by university-educated members of Milpaltense society, and not by my other interlocutors. Most articulated these issues in terms of “traditional” roles in a marriage, machismo, and women’s suffering. By eliding the morally loaded term “violence”, the situation of women was shifted onto more ambiguous ground.

For example, the lyrics for the Nahuatl-language dance *Xochipitzahuac* (Slender Flower), which is often performed at weddings and cultural events, could be read as demonstrating the cultural normalisation of violence against women: “And when I was a young girl/oh my meals, oh my tamales/ and once I got married/ only a fist in my mouth”. However, while the song is often introduced as an “ancestral tradition”, its historical origin is unknown, and the current version was first recorded in the 1970s. A version of the song recorded by Friedlander (2006) in the Nahuatl-speaking village of Hueyapan, Morelos, also in the 1970s, does not contain the lyrics above. In addition, the Tlacotecan lyrics actually express an ambivalent position. It satirises spousal abuse, presenting it as a normal development in a marriage, but does not condone it or frame it as a cultural phenomenon. Beyond its literal sense, the “fist in my mouth” is a punchline, laconically expressing that spousal abuse may be born from economic strain, when a family struggles to even feed itself. Not the violence is a cultural norm here, but the wry

humour with which it is narrated and the emphasis on feeding as a key focus of family life and economic activity. As I will show in the following chapter, many of my Milpaltense interlocutors considered spousal abuse to be a regular occurrence, but disagreed on the extent to which culture could be blamed for it.

To summarise, Inmujeres' professed attention to "cultural violence" does not refer to the dynamic, shifting cultural-cosmological differences and similarities in the understanding of violence at the centre of the present thesis, such as the common Milpaltense notion of respectlessness as violence. It would be difficult to deny that there is some cultural variation in the expression and legitimation of violence. However, "cultural violence," as used by the Inmujeres director, appears to rest on a distorted notion of culture, which inadvertently essentialises ethnic otherness and assumes a lack of education on Milpaltenses' part, buoyed by unreliable violence data. She was correct to observe that certain Milpaltense individuals, such as the linguist, refer to an essentialised notion of culture which enables them to justify certain kinds of violence. Yet referring to this as "cultural violence" risks tautologically presenting Indigenous populations as more violent because of their Indigeneity, instead of recognising contestations and ambiguities in the conceptualisation of violence, Indigeneity, and culture.

Barriers

There are significant structural reasons why Milpaltense women do not seek out Inmujeres or UAPVIF services. Though these are not the focus of my research, I will highlight a few of these barriers briefly here, in recognition of the large body of research showing that structures of gendered social inequality are the strongest factor affecting the likelihood of violence against women. In Milpa Alta, some women embrace violence prevention services and others would be interested in these but cannot access them. To begin with, there is a lack of public transport options between the various pueblos of Milpa Alta and using taxis can be dangerous and is too expensive for some. Many women are also hindered by their long work hours and childcare obligations. I mentioned previously that women without documentation or without sufficient levels of school education are excluded from taking part in most job training courses offered by Inmujeres. Moreover, they may fear reputational damage if their neighbours see them

leaving the house for unknown reasons and they might fear repercussions if their partner finds out where they went. Women often fear violent pushback in response to their emancipation, mainly based on rumour. For example, a 30-year-old woman who had taken a plumbing course with Inmujeres later became a femicide victim – something which deeply affected her instructor, who had kept a picture of the two of them. Another young mother, who was studying to become a financially independent nurse, told me she was thrown out by her partner because he wanted her to stay at home like a “traditional” woman, while showing no support for her culturally conservative interests in rabbit breeding and learning Nahuatl. Other women spoke of positive experiences with Inmujeres. For instance, Inmujeres’ janitor is a Oaxacan immigrant who, feeling empowered by Inmujeres’ messages of self-esteem, found the courage to confront her partner’s racism and disrespect, and now perceives herself as having a greater say in the relationship. Similarly, a young, university-educated mother said that Inmujeres helped her to build a new, independent life, when she felt forced to leave her violent, drug-addicted partner. The point is that the outcomes of accepting Inmujeres’ help seem unpredictable, and some women are deterred by the perceived risks.

But also with respect to conceptual barriers, Inmujeres’ rather modest impact on the community cannot be convincingly explained with the director’s claims of “cultural” normalisation of violence and wilful ignorance on the part of Milpaltenses. Many Milpaltenses I spoke to objected to Inmujeres’s culturally insensitive terminology, such as their six types of violence, or emphasis on self-love. Or as my friend Yolotl put it, “I agree with your observations about the deficiency of Inmujeres’s programme, which universalises the problem in a place where violence is perceived in an entirely different way.” (I will discuss Milpaltense concepts of violence in Chapter 3.)

Because of these various types of barriers, women-led cultural revitalisation groups, such as the *tlacuateras*, represented an attractive alternative to Inmujeres for many women, as they fostered networks of solidarity and knowledge exchange about violent experiences as well as conflict mediation strategies. It was common, for example, to chat about topics, such as troublesome ex-husbands and in-laws, stray dog attacks, bureaucratic nightmares, or being robbed. A middle-aged shopkeeper described how much it had meant to her that her fellow *tlacuateras* had come to visit her at the hospital after she had been hit by a car. Her main business rival, a single mother who was

considered a *fracasada* (fallen woman) by socially conservative Milpaltenses, was equally devoted to the *tlacualeras*, as this group treated her with respect. As Ámparo's right hand, she even wielded some power over other members, who were her social superiors in other situations. Being *tlacualeras* thus gave women a choice whether to discuss violent experiences, or leave such worries behind. Contrary to Inmujeres' "cultural violence" claims, the women rarely viewed the violence in their lives as acceptable, but visiting Inmujeres was inconvenient in practical terms and would mark them as victims, a socially undesirable epithet, whereas attending *tlacualeras* meetings in their own *pueblo* marked them as valued, skilled, and hardworking members of their community.

The following scene illustrates the issues in applying global feminist frames, beyond the just mentioned perpetrator-victim models, to the Milpaltense context. On an afternoon in mid-August, two young, Mexico City-based female students of community health organised a workshop on Indigenous women's rights for the *tlacualeras* and their friends as part of their degree requirements. Unfortunately, I was not present for the workshop, but some of the women who were there told me about it and said it was well received. The students asked women about their daily activities and informed them about their rights on three posters, titled: "*Declaración Universal de los Derechos Humanos*" (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, UDHR), "*Derechos de los pueblos indígenas*" (Indigenous peoples' rights), "*Derechos de las mujeres*" (Women's rights, see fig. 12). The *tlacualeras* were interested in learning about these. Then, the women were encouraged to write or draw their ideas on "*¿Qué es la mujer?*" (What is a woman?) This activity proved complicated. The answers, pinned to a board, revealed elementary-school-levels of literacy in most cases, and Bety was excluded from participating in this exercise, as she cannot read or write. Most of the women wrote very short answers based on their immediate experience, focussing on women's roles as mothers, sisters, and so on, their chores, and their prized quality as "*trabajadoras*" (hard workers). Their responses showed how deeply ingrained the idea of the "strong woman" was in Milpa Alta. Thus, the *tlacualeras* welcomed the information about rights as a potential tool for their personal and communal struggles, but did not seem to use it to critique asymmetries of power in their families and everyday work, or to question the way in which their strong-woman subjectivity may sustain these. The students politely refrained from imposing their own views on their participants.

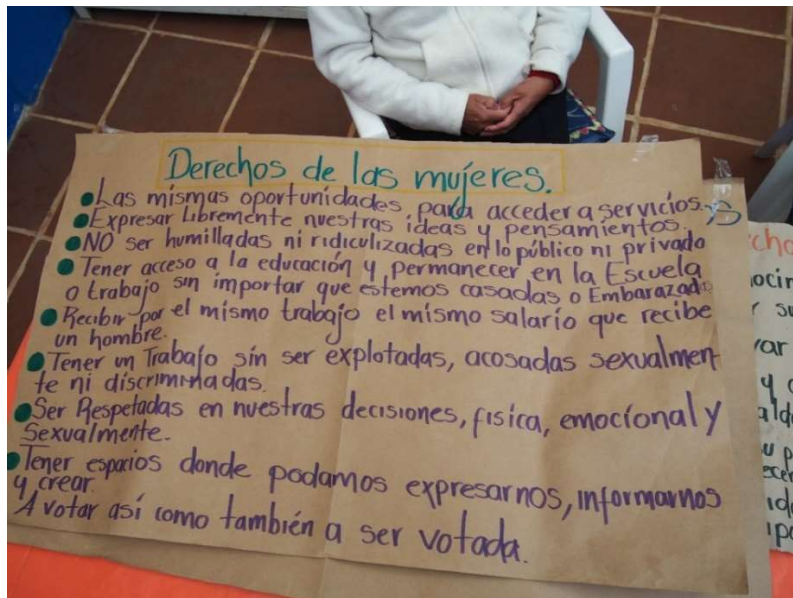


FIGURE 12: THE STUDENTS' WOMEN'S RIGHTS POSTERS

THE CUNNING OF COLLABORATION

I experienced the “awkward relationship” between activist and ethnographic ways of knowing about violence against women first hand towards the end of my fieldwork, when Inmujeres invited me to give a talk at a forum on the prevention of violence against women and children. The forum took place in the Milpaltense town of San Antonio Tecómitl and was organised as part of a series of events during the 16 Days of Activism to Fight Gender-Based Violence on 4 December 2015 between 10 am and 2 pm. It mainly consisted of talks and panel discussions, seeking to bring together feminist activists, the local population and local authorities. There were presentations on femicide by a representative of the Milpaltense police force, on familial and sexual violence in Milpa Alta by the civic organisation, Corporea, on Inmujeres’ work in Milpa Alta, on preventing sexual violence from a psychiatric perspective, and on resilience, again from a psychiatric perspective. The audience of roughly 60 individuals, which mostly consisted of people who had previously taken part in Inmujeres’ activities or courses, and were already sensitised to the topic of gender violence, was invited to participate by asking questions and writing their own suggestions onto hand-shaped cards as to how violence against women and girls might be stopped.

In deciding how to write my presentation, I was reminded of Harvey's observation that Strathern's (1987) "awkward relationship" between the feminist and the anthropologist can be embodied in one scholar: "in our attempts as anthropologists to write about issues which have a high profile on the feminist political agenda we are caught in the dilemma of both *knowing* what is involved and why we disapprove and *knowing that we do not know* exactly what we are dealing with as we try to respect the cultural differences which confront and confound us" (Harvey 1998: 75, emphasis in the original). On the one hand, I wanted to convert my academic findings into concrete recommendations for Inmujeres, rather than merely criticise their work, as I knew that they did actually provide invaluable support to some women. On the other hand, it was important to me to challenge universalising urban middle-class feminist narratives about women's oppression by showing how Milpaltense women themselves view their situation.

Heartened by successful previous presentations of my material to anthropological audiences both in Mexico and the US, I was unprepared for the unapologetic prejudices I encountered in the Q and A. I had sought to describe that many Milpaltense women expect and endure violence in their lives because they do not identify as victims, but as "strong women". Ignoring my message, two comments from the audience showed that at least some people were selective in what they took from it, so that they misrepresented it as evidence for "backwardness" that needs to be overcome. Mortified, I witnessed my words being turned around and used to mobilise negative stereotypes of the Nahuatl-speaking population. This reminded me of the stark divisions within Milpa Alta, which I discussed in the previous chapter: while some members of the Nahuatl-speaking elite leverage their ancestral heritage as a source of income and prestige, the fact that Indigenous languages are a key marker of Indigeneity in Mexican multicultural politics means that Nahuatl-speakers are often treated as socially inferior and culturally "other" even by members of their own community. Being viewed as "descendants of the Aztecs", means being associated with the Aztecs' bloodthirsty reputation. Perhaps linked to the symbolic association with Aztec ritual, some of my interlocutors in Villa Milpa Alta said there were many witches among the Nahuatl-speaking population of Tlacotenco. I was only given opportunity to counter the first comment about "backwardness", but the second comment showed me that even those clarifications were futile. The notion appeared too sticky, as it allowed those present to dismiss and ignore the possibility that

alternative cultural logics could also be valid, instead holding on to the globalised narrative of patriarchal violence against women promoted by Inmujeres.²⁹

Audience prejudice aside, the mere fact that I was invited shows that Inmujeres is interested in ethnographic ways of understanding violence, and seems to contradict the director's earlier statement about the irreconcilability of feminist and anthropological positions. When I spoke to her after the forum, she seemed sympathetic to my worry about the way my "strong woman" presentation had been interpreted. Yet consistent with their remit as a federal agency, Inmujeres primarily employs ethnographic data to promote their organisation and justify its importance, rather than attempt to understand alternative perspectives on violence and gender, which would challenge certain aspects of their approach, including the use of certain words and images. The result is that Milpaltense women who welcome development aid, of which there are many, are not always getting the kind of help they want in a language they can identify with – a problem shared with Indigenous women across Latin America (Radcliffe 2015). So, Inmujeres has collaborated with and employed applied feminist anthropologists, such as Gilda Salazar and the Inmujeres director in order to collect evidence of violence against women and to gain insights on how to approach Indigenous groups and find acceptance. Rather than reject ethnographic insights, they embrace these – as long as they support Inmujeres' mission.

Revisiting the "awkward relationship"

I employ the term "mission" advisedly, as Inmujeres' approach to ethnographic data is somewhat reminiscent of Catholic missionaries' deployment of ethnography in the Americas, in the sense that the clergy often mimicked "indigenous sacred forms or [adopted] these to ease catechistic or other religious teaching" (Mayblin, Norget, and Napolitano 2017: 8). Inmujeres workers show interest in local lifeworlds and adapt some aspects of their practice if necessary. They do not, however, subject their own beliefs to question. While the Mexican Government has adopted multiculturalist policies, officially protecting Indigenous peoples constitutionally via the 1992 *ley indígena*, it is ineffective in practice (Friedlander 2006: 183). Reaching the UN Sustainable Development Goal

²⁹ Similarly, Smith-Oka observed that members of Mexico City's economic and intellectual elite had a tendency to dismiss Indigenous knowledges, instead viewing these people's ideas as "backward and [...] in need of modernizing", "blam[ing] the indigenous people for their own subjugation" (2013: 34).

Number 5 of gender equality and women's empowerment appears to inspire renewed paternalistic rhetoric not only in government-funded Inmujeres offices, but also in abortion clinics (Singer 2017) and cash transfer programs, which effectively control Indigenous women's reproduction and mothering practices (Smith-Oka 2013). Like in the colonial contexts of Sumatra (Stoler 2002) and Australia (Povinelli 2002, 2006), the management of love and sex is a key concern for the Mexican state's development plans.

Spivak (1988: 92) drew attention to the paternalistic and racist assumptions underlying the global discourse around gender and development when she pithily wrote that white men presume to save brown women from brown men. Rather than helping women in developing countries, such attitudes reinforce notions of their helplessness and ignore their voices. In Milpa Alta, the situation might seem quite different: Mexican women are helping other Mexican women, who are encouraged to speak, and ethnic and racial categories are mixed on both sides. Yet I suggest that Spivak's analysis nonetheless has some purchase in this context. For one, the Inmujeres director was an urban *mestiza*, who only lived in Milpa Alta briefly, and whose light skin and curly hair stood out in Milpa Alta. Her feminism aligned with messages promoted by the UN and the Mexican Government, and thus differs from that of the Milpaltense UAPVIF director, who viewed Milpaltense women as strong and already empowered – which did not foreclose the possibility of them occasionally needing help. Moreover, as a centralised, federal institution, Inmujeres promotes messages that Indigenous women need to be saved from the “cultural violence” of their people, even though it is evident that the solutions and desired outcomes for Mexican women are not universal, but structured by their intersectional identities and the contingencies of their intimate relationships.

Note that Inmujeres' and other development initiatives' attempts to gain “conceptual mastery” over Milpaltense lifeworlds have complex effects: In postcolonial contexts, the “colonization of consciousness” is neither complete, nor resisted in a uniform manner (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992: 235-263). Among my interlocutors, higher levels of education correlated with a greater likelihood of accepting Inmujeres' concept of violence against women and self-love. These individuals were more likely to marry at an older age, or to be single parents, to be middle class, and to have a flexible lifestyle, rather than rigid routines. However, how they incorporated Inmujeres' ideas into their lives varied considerably: For example, the student Jenny espoused an ecofeminist

outlook, while a female teacher collaborated with Inmujeres while rejecting the concepts of self-love and feminism for herself. A highschool student sought to emulate Inmujeres' model of feminine subjectivity more closely, which she associated with being "modern". While several male leaders, including Tlacotenco's priest, spoke out against violence against women at public events, ordinary husbands often seemed to struggle with reconciling their own aspirations to be "modern" professionals with their wives' aspirations, so that some insisted on having a "traditional" marriage, while criticising the "backwardness" of their wives. Thus, some people appeared to leverage competing concepts to their advantage, mixing and matching aspects of what were perceived to be "traditional" and "modern" lifestyles in order to maximise their power at home and in the community.

What does this mean for the "awkward relationship" between feminism and anthropology? Harvey (1998) and Strathern (1987) appear to assume that we can trust knowing our own (feminist) views and do not know those of (non-feminist) others. This culturally relativist assumption has been challenged by feminist theorist Sara Ahmed (2000): While ostensibly "unknown", "Others" are constructed as already known in the sense that it is already assumed that their realities are different to one's own (cf. Spivak 1988). Similarly, I argue that there is overlap between Inmujeres' feminism, Milpaltense women's, and my own attitudes towards violence. There are, however, also major differences in our motivations, even as our agendas are woven into each other's as well as into larger agendas, such as that of the Mexican Government and of global feminist activist networks.

Even as the old "awkward relationship" appears to collapse in light of the ethnographic evidence, another awkward relationship remains: the relationship between ethnographic data and its institutional use, or, more bluntly, between anthropology and governance. The awkwardness arises from the decontextualisation and selective extraction of ethnographic data in order to justify pre-defined policies: In many postcolonial contexts, "ethnographic concepts [became] convenient descriptive categories for classifying groups of people into suitable targets for administrative, legal, economic or electoral policy", eventually shaping developmental policy (Chatterjee 2004: 37). Inmujeres is by no means the only feminist development organisation approaching ethnography in this way. For example, Cheng (2015) argued that the transnational NGO

lobby Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW) systematically mined trafficked Filipino “entertainers” in Korea for stories of victimhood – the more sensational the story, the better for lending authenticity and legitimacy to NGO claims. By ignoring women’s agency and needs, CATW effectively re-victimized them. Cheng also suggested that anti-sex trafficking policies “confer moral authority upon the state” (2015: 201), leaving material, social, and legal structures that made sexual exploitation possible in the first place untouched, and thus ultimately reproducing the existing gender order.

Inmujeres’ and CATW’s approach to ethnographic data is enabled by what Mohanty has called the “Feminist-as-tourist model”: “brief forays are made into non-Euro-American cultures, and particular sexist cultural practices addressed from an otherwise Eurocentric women’s studies gaze. [...] This strategy leaves power relations and hierarchies untouched since ideas about center and margin are reproduced along Eurocentric lines” (Mohanty 2003: 518-519). To counter this tendency, Tsing suggests “situating local commentaries [...] within wider negotiations of meaning and power at the same time as recognizing local stakes and specificities” (1993: 9). These negotiations are shaped by “the intersections of race, class, gender, nation, and sexuality in different communities of women [as well as] mutuality and coimplication, which suggests attentiveness to the interweaving of the histories of these communities” (Mohanty 2003: 522).

My work and subjectivities are interwoven with Milpaltense women’s lives in multiple ways. Our conversations have influenced my feminism and my approach to ethnography, and my writing may yet influence Inmujeres’ work. As a Catholic and a white European, I am also connected to Milpaltense lifeworlds via colonial legacies, and as a scholar whose fieldwork was funded by the Mexican Government, which required me to submit trimestral reports, I am all too aware of the multiple layers of privilege I enjoyed vis-à-vis my interlocutors, and the danger of my reports being misread, as much as I avoided writing anything overtly “political”. These are only some of the multiple awkward power relationships that produced this research and that are challenging to resolve. By contrast, intersectional feminism and a politically aware anthropology of “situated perspectives” (Malkki 2007; Tsing 1993; Lamphere, Ragoné, and Zavella 1997; see Introduction) are an easy fit.

CONCLUSIONS

While there are “awkward relationships” between activist and ethnographic ways of making sense of violence, the work of Inmujeres shows that the two are not neatly divided, but influence each other. Real awkwardness arises from Inmujeres’ selective engagement with ethnographic data: It is welcomed as an extractable resource to justify its mission and ignored when it challenges the mission. There is also a tension between Inmujeres’ and the UN’s goal of promoting women’s “empowerment” and the lack of government investment in it as well as other unaddressed barriers Milpaltense women face to accessing services. Moreover, ethnographic research is the product of multiple awkward power relationships, including that between anthropologist and informant and that of researcher and funder.

Nonetheless, the image of the irreconcilability between feminism and anthropology persists: firstly, because it describes a real tension between liberal feminist narratives of violence against women as a global phenomenon and defenders of liberal multiculturalism, and secondly, because some Mexican government institutions, such as Inmujeres, have described their mission as fighting cultural violence in their educational materials³⁰, a notion that was echoed when interviewing the director of the Milpaltense Inmujeres branch and at a public forum on gender violence. The concept of “cultural violence” does not refer to ever-changing culturally and socio-politically influenced divergences in the understanding of violence, but instead rests on a simplified, negative perception of culture which is seen as legitimising violence. “Cultural violence” is a term rejected by many anthropologists because it has been used to denigrate Indigenous and rural people as being inherently more violent, and because sociocultural attitudes and definitions are constantly changing and vary within a population. Thus, claiming that a particular cultural group favours violence is almost inevitably going to be a gross oversimplification. Yet even some Milpaltenses strategically invoke the concept to promote their respective agendas, such as staking claims to social superiority or justifying

³⁰ Consider the following excerpts blaming culture for violence: “What gives rise to violence against women? Violence is a learned behaviour that is rooted in culture and in the way the latter is structured” (my translation, Inmujeres 2008: 14); “gender-based violence is also based in the pressures, fears, and repressed emotions undergirding ‘hegemonic masculinity’ or many of the forms of masculine dominance accepted in many cultures of the world” (my translation, Tuana n.d.: 20).

their own violence. My aim in this chapter has been to map these interconnected awkward power relationships as a point of reference for my discussions of Milpaltense people's views on violence against women, femininity, and gender relations in the following chapters. Importantly, the presented material shows that violence against Milpaltense women is enmeshed with other violences, such as ongoing forms of colonialism and discrimination within the politics of gender and development on the national and international level.

3. Contested Cosmologies

*Es el tiempo del miedo: miedo de la mujer a la violencia del hombre
y miedo del hombre a la mujer sin miedo.*

*(It is the time of fear: woman's fear of man's violence
and man's fear of the fearless woman.)*

Eduardo Galeano – “El miedo manda”

They found Adelita’s body where they dump the manure by the Mexico-Oaxtepec highway. They never found the culprits. Rumour named the two usual suspects: an unauthorised *pirata* (pirate) taxi driver turned robber and her husband, who had not reported her as missing and whom, it was speculated, she might have been cheating on.

The stout church musician Ana walked ahead of the funeral procession holding a bouquet in each hand and a large poster of a smiling, round-faced woman in a pink sweater. “ADELITA” was written above her image and “CHAPARRITA” (shorty) below. Her image conveyed Adelita’s vibrant youth and the love others felt for her. According to Socorro, Ana is a close friend of Adelita’s father, but neither related nor bound to the family by *compadrazgo*³¹. The church was full for the funeral mass. Though Father Jesús was present, another priest ran the mass. Father Jesús, himself grieving, sprinkled the coffin with holy water, greeted the family, cleansed the coffin with incense, and welcomed the procession to the church. Even at this last farewell, the coffin remained closed – a silent reminder of the gruelling wounds inflicted on her body. During the mass, Adelita’s family sobbed, while her husband kept an angry expression. The priest’s sermon mirrored this atmosphere of grief. He praised Adelita for preparing well for death, alongside the “love of her life”, and condemned her murderer, who would be judged in Hell. Finally, he warned that “big city” violence is here in Santa Ana now: We must be vigilant. Even the choir’s “Hallelujah” sounded solemn.

³¹ Form of ritual kinship, literally: “co-parenthood”.

After the mass, I sought comfort at the Corncob Festival, which was taking place on the main plaza, and spoke with my friend “Zucaritas”, a chocolate vendor and follower of the shaman. It was the last day, and some stalls had already packed up. I asked him what he thinks violence is, but he deflected my question, saying that it was like asking, “What is love?”

Defining violence would appear indispensable for understanding “violence against women”, yet Zucaritas and most other Milpaltenses found violence difficult, or indeed impossible, to define. Is it even useful to speak of “violence” in the context of Milpa Alta? In the following, I will argue that the cosmological dual principle of order and chaos with which many Milpaltenses classify the world has the potential of transforming our understanding of “violence” as it is commonly put to work in Anglophone anthropology. Recall that divergent cosmologies, as ever-changing systems of meaning, orient, but do not determine, Milpaltenses’ discourse, behaviour, and moral judgment in relation to violence. Violence emerges as neither inherently legitimate or illegitimate, good or bad, but perspectival, as it constantly shifts its meaning in this context, where Catholicism, Aztec and New Age religions, as well as globalised moral discourses are at once interwoven and competing against each other. The creative potential of violence will become evident in the example of folktales about serpent-like feminine divinities. Thus, this chapter aims to contribute to the growing body of anthropological studies of cosmologies of violence (e.g. Harris 1994; Taylor 1999; Whitehead 2002; Strathern, Stewart, and Whitehead 2006).

I regard engaging with cosmological ideas of violence and gender to be important because anthropological assumptions about violence and its gendered nature are rooted in these (see also Introduction). I will engage with four common messages emerging from the vast field of anthropological studies of violence, which are also highly prevalent assumptions among activists fighting violence against women. Because this field is so vast and complex, extracting four messages from it means doing it injustice: Distilled into their essence, these messages will inevitably appear somewhat unfair to those whom they are ascribed to, who often take great care to nuance their arguments and consider exceptions.

However, some theoretical reduction is a necessary sacrifice for making generalisations of broader significance.

1) Violence is gendered

Though gender is fairly marginal to some introductions to the anthropology of violence (Riches 1986; Whitehead 2004a), anthropologists have often argued that “it is difficult to conceive of violence without addressing its almost inevitably gendered contours” (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004: 22). Yet what anthropologists mean by “gender violence” varies considerably. For Merry (2009), it describes a global phenomenon with distinctive expressions across cultural contexts. For others, the term is practically redundant: violence is always already gendered, modulating its “meanings, deployments, and ends” (Aretxaga 1995: 144; cf. Nordstrom 2005). Different genders “as social actors each experience violence and conflict differently, both as victims and as perpetrators; and [...] have differential access to resources (including power and decision-making) during [...] conditions of violence” (Moser 2001: 30). However, the gendering of violence is in constant flux and depends on historical developments as well as other dimensions of identity, such as ethnicity (Aretxaga 1997). According to this argument, violence has profound effects on constructions of identity, including gender identity, and is often motivated by the latter. By focussing on experience, Aretxaga does not assume the presence of gender hierarchy, as Merry does, but merely that gender is a distinctive category of experience and identity. It is therefore worth examining in what ways violence might be gendered in Milpa Alta (or not).

2) Violence is easily readable

The speculation around Adelita’s death and Zucaritas’ comparison between violence and love, pointing to the indeterminacy of affect, pose a challenge to substantive definitions of violence, according to which violent acts send an unequivocal message. Though far from the disciplinary consensus, several theorists have argued that violence has concrete aims and is the very foundation of much social life. For Bloch, violence is “a result of the attempt to create the transcendental in religion and politics” (1992: 7), Sahlins (1976)

presents war as a form of “negative exchange,” and Graeber adds, citing Whitehead (2004b), “It would be absurd to deny that acts of violence are, typically, meant as acts of communication, or that they tend to be surrounded by symbols and generate myths.” (2012: 116). The perils of such views have been pithily summarised by Nordstrom: “A concern with the reasons of war comes dangerously close to a concern with making war reasonable” (1995: 138). Similarly, Graeber cautions that limiting one’s analysis to the message perpetrators are seeking to send, makes one complicit in the work of that violence (2012: 124).

Thus, my aim in the following is not to reconstruct a cultural logic of violence, but to analyse how Milpaltenses both construct and deconstruct attempts at establishing such a logic. As we have seen in the previous chapter, some Milpaltenses, such as Inmujeres workers, have an interest in defining “cultural violence” and “violence against women”, even in distinguishing between various subtypes, in order to condemn these. Simultaneously, the Sisyphean nature of disseminating these definitions among ordinary Milpaltenses indicates that the meaning and immorality of violence cannot easily be “fixed”. I will present more examples of such conceptual tensions below.

3) Violence is evil

Particularly in studies of structural violence (Farmer 2004; Bourgois 2001; Scheper-Hughes 1992), it is often assumed that violence is bad and heralds a breakdown of social relations (but see Whitehead 2004b). According to these definitions, a violence that does not cause suffering or harm of any kind is not really violence (Hinton 2004: 183). Consider this citation from the American Anthropological Association’s 1999 Human Rights statement: “[T]he global environment is *fraught* with violence which is *perpetrated* by states [...] and other actors. That *violence limits the humanity* of individuals and collectives” (emphasis added). The negative image of violence in anthropology at large is likely to stem from a specific cosmology, which Agamben (1995) traces back to Christian mythology, Roman law, and Greek philosophy. In this worldview, man is bad by nature and good by exception, namely through civilization. Similarly, Enlightenment philosophy values reason and self-control highly, influencing anthropologists to omit violence or explain it

away and thereby produce romantic and idealised images of the people they study (Harris 1994: 40-41).

Yet in Aztec philosophy, existence is not structured around an essentialised, bipolar good-bad opposition, but around dual complementary forces in a constant process of exchange (Maffie 2014). The concept of *olin*, “movement”, models this: its glyph represents the switching between and intertwining of complementary cosmic (*inamic*) forces (López Austin 2012: 59) and stands for change within a cycle (Maffie 2014: 190). Accordingly, occasional violence, such as human sacrifice, was necessary to give the gods strength in return for their sacrifices in giving life (López Austin and López Luján 2008). The historical influence of Aztec philosophy on Milpa Alta, both in the sense of continuities and more recent engagements with pop-cultural and academic depictions of the Aztec past³², may account for cases in which some Milpaltenses’ moral views appear to clash with international anti-violence discourses, despite being subject to many other influences, including Catholicism and more recent human rights discourses. Thus, while Inmujeres may seek to establish particular acts of violence as inherently bad, I will show that many Milpaltenses’ narratives and experiences complicate Inmujeres’ moral frame.

4) Violence is either legitimate or illegitimate

Since its inception, the anthropology of violence has been concerned with the legitimization of violence. Notably, Riches (1986) argued that in Anglo-Saxon discourse, the aggressor typically legitimises violence as a pre-emptive strategy, while victims contest it as illegitimate, and witnesses may intervene as arbiters. The point that the meaning of violence changes with the perspective is well taken. Yet while Riches was careful to include examples beyond his schematic tripartite model, he problematically concluded that “if an act of violence has no instrumental aim, it would not be performed” (ibid.: 25). What of examples where violence serves no discernible purpose or where collective action blurs notions of individual agency and consent? In the same way as war and peace are indistinguishable in many contexts, “[t]he violence paradigm – that distinguishes predator,

³² For example, I found that academic graphs from Alfredo López Austin’s seminal historical study, *Cuerpo humano e ideología: las concepciones de los antiguos nahuas* (1980), circulated in Milpaltense Nahuatl language classes without attribution, as if they were accurate depictions of current Milpaltense Nahuatl and Nahua philosophy.

victim, and audience – is no longer convincing” (Warren 2015: 122). Das instead argued for separating agency, such as that of a politician or of a witness, from the instrument of action, such as a mob, and from the symbolic space of the body, such as those of a hooligan and his victim: “It is not only in ritual but also in other kinds of spectacles [...] that one finds that an instrumental relation to the body is subordinated to [...] one which resonates with the culture” (1987: 12). Like sacrifice, the morality or legitimacy of violence is perspectival and can only be determined in reference to the circumstantial context of the act (cf. Aretxaga 2004).

Other authors draw on Benjamin (1986: 277-300) to distinguish “legitimate” from “illegitimate” violence, according to which the former is enforced by the judiciary, while the latter lacks this recourse. This theory focussed on the relationship between violence, law, and justice –which varies considerably across the world. Yet absence of the rule of law “does not necessarily imply a lack of shared norms or sense of predictability for those caught up in it” (Benda-Beckman and Pirie 2007: 2). Accordingly, Raby (2012) removed Benjamin’s concepts from the judicial sphere to describe the informal collective enforcement of social norms regarding violence against women by a Nahuatl-speaking community in Guerrero.

While Raby’s ethnographic descriptions resonate with many of my observations in Milpa Alta, I have found it more fruitful to organise my discussion around Milpaltense concepts, which do not neatly map onto Benjamin’s framework. As I will discuss in the following, what is legitimate, and what is not, is a matter of generational and gender dispute in Milpa Alta and also differs from pueblo to pueblo. More importantly, Milpaltenses are often more concerned with the consequences of their actions, which is to say, with sustaining a certain social balance, than with legitimacy *per se*, though local rights struggles and their expression in the language of human rights have also given rise to narratives of legitimacy.

(DIS)ORDERING VIOLENCE

One warm and sunny Saturday afternoon, while waiting for the *nabual* to give us another lesson about the order of the cosmos and how it is reflected in earthly things, such as our

own faces, the apprentice Juan began philosophising about “*violencia, robotismo, insensibilidad en frente al planeta*” (violence, roboticism, insensibility towards the planet). He gave the example of littering the environment: “*no nos importa que el mundo llegue al caos*” (we don’t care that the world may be headed into chaos). Juan stressed that the disharmony we see is a sign that the world is “chaotic” (*caótico*).

Like Juan and the *nahual*, many Milpaltenses classify the world according to two cosmological principles. One is *orden* (order), which describes the upholding of communal structures by shared work (*trabajo*)³³, organised ritual labour (*cargo*), living together well (*convivir bien*) and following traditional norms (*usos y costumbres*), typically highlighting equally empowered actors, interdependence, and respect, similar to the ideal model of marriage highlighted by Leona in the introduction. This notion of order is consistent with the manner in which cosmologies of other Nahua populations have been described (Good Eshelman 2015a). The other is *caos* (chaos), corresponding to transgressive actions involving an aggressor and a victim, and involves independent and dependent behaviours. These twin forces play a strong role in structuring meaning-making in Milpa Alta, including with respect to actions and structures British interlocutors would commonly identify as “violent”, and which Milpaltenses might instead identify as “*conflictivo/a*” (conflict-generating) or “*haciéndole coraje, miedo o vergüenza*” (causing someone anger, fear or shame). For instance, disciplining someone verbally or physically might be regarded as an action directed towards restoring order and preventing future conflict, and abusing someone is regarded as breeding chaos. A female politician, who was already violating gender role expectations through her work, was accused by other women of spending time with violent individuals and sowing discord. To give another example, many Milpaltenses did not perceive lynching a thief or rapist negatively, but as a way of restoring order and balance after somebody deliberately stirred up trouble.

³³ Eguiluz (2011) notes that the Spanish term *trabajo* does not capture the ideology of Milpaltense work, which she considers to be enshrined in the concepts of *tequio* (from Nahuatl, *tequitl*, “work”, meaning shared work), *manovuelta* (reciprocal, voluntary work, particularly in the context of feast preparations), and *ipalnemohuani* (an omnipresent communal spirit inherent to all). While I agree with Eguiluz’ view of ideology, her terms of analysis are derived from a small corpus of texts, rather than from a representative sample of Milpaltense voices. In my own data, only *manovuelta* occasionally features. So I employed terms I encountered in Milpaltense parlance for the present discussion instead of Eguiluz’ model.



FIGURE 13: A TLACOTENSE WARNING TO THIEVES

For instance, on the bus to Milpa Alta, my 30-year-old friend Enrique told me he had been present at a recent lynching in the S. José chapel. A mob of men and women locked a robber into the chapel and hit him. Somebody even bit the man on the nose. In the end, the police, which had stood aside, took the man, who was thought to be from a neighbouring town, to the hospital, where he died of his injuries. Several signs in Milpa Alta are constant warnings that a similar fate is in store for all thieves, if caught (see fig. 13). When I asked Enrique what the experience felt like, he explained that many people are poor and need to save money for a long time to buy a car, so if somebody tries to steal it, the community is outraged on the victim's behalf. He himself said he felt "free" (*libre*), which surprised me. He explained that he felt protected by people in the community keeping each other safe from harm. He then suggested that lynching protects the social fabric, creating a sense of community. When I likened the practice to the function of ritual labour, he laughed but agreed. To me, it was chilling that a soft-spoken, good-natured art lover and conservationist like him was capable of condoning and possibly taking part in such violence remorselessly. He appeared convinced that the mob was acting as an agent of justice in the absence of a functioning and fair legal system.

The distinction I draw between order-oriented actions as opposed to chaos-inducing actions must be understood as an analytical artefact with the purpose of distinguishing which “violent” actions (in the eye of the foreign observer) are usually more socially acceptable in Milpa Alta than others. It also conveys how Milpaltenses come to perceive conflict as a gender-balanced phenomenon. I have to stress that none of my interlocutors in the field have defined local forms of aggression, punishment, and conflict in the schematic manner as I am doing in this chapter. This is also not an exhaustive discussion of relevant terms – though hopefully somewhat representative.

Order

While not all Milpaltenses specifically invoked the order-chaos dyad in everyday conversation, I identified three discursive categories within the discourse on order-oriented actions surrounding conflict and social problems in Milpa Alta: *castigo* (discipline), *control*, and *defensa* (defence). These described not random, but often well-considered actions, which were aimed at restoring familial or social balance, and were often considered acceptable by third parties within what we might call “social norms”, as I will show in the examples below. In addition, most of the actions pertaining to these categories were typically associated with a specific gender, and with hierarchical relations within kinship networks.

Castigo

Seniors may assert their right to punish younger members of their kin group or child protégées. “Teachers used to hit us, but there was nothing wrong with that,” a middle-aged visitor who wanted to inquire about weaving classes said to the *tlacualeras*. One answered, “*Mi mama incluso me felicitaba cuando el maestro me pegó*” (My mum even congratulated me when the teacher hit me). Someone else piped in, “*Ahora los estudiantes pegan a los maestros y no pasa nada*” (Now the pupils hit their teachers and it’s nothing). The general consensus in the room was that physical discipline is good for children.

Moreover, in an intact family, Milpaltense fathers are often attributed the right to punish younger family members’ misdemeanours with belt lashings or smacks, yet the

legitimacy of the punishment depends on others recognising the misdemeanour as such. Some of the older women I knew would not say that their husband was “violent”, but did complain of his “impatience” (*impaciencia*) or unprovoked jealousy (*celos*). For example, the elderly widow Victoria remembered with fearful eyes her late husband was not always “patient” with her. By talking about his good qualities, such as helping with household chores and looking handsome in his *vaquero* (cowboy) dancer outfit, Victoria showed that she was devoted to his memory and would not have said anything negative about him. Hence, she separated the disputed legitimacy of her punishment from the moral qualities of her husband and herself. In contrast, Bety, an illiterate widow of simple means, who married at the age of 13, said that her late husband used to come home drunk and beat her, until she decided that enough was enough and told him, “You come home drunk from ‘work’ – you haven’t even worked!” She told him that he had been wrong to beat her and he was stunned, believing that she was unable to think for herself and somebody must have put her up to her disobedience.

So while women may dispute whether their husband’s conduct towards them was “legitimate” in a given moment, many did accept that husbands occasionally need to punish their wives and children, in the same way as women may discipline their sons, even into adulthood: A mother might punish an adulterous son upon his wife’s complaint. Thus, in cases of misdemeanour, or as Milpaltenses put it, “chaotic” or “conflictive” action, either men or women then have the privilege, and indeed the duty, to discipline, depending on which members of their families were responsible. In practice, this is only likely to occur when mother-in-laws have a good relationship with their daughter-in-laws, which is not always the case. So while several people, including the Tlacotecan sociologist, mentioned this structured system of punishing duties, I am not aware of concrete cases in which families have strictly followed this system. Conversely, I did hear of several cases in which mothers-in-law had violent confrontations with their daughters-in-law.

This means that the oft-asserted gender-balanced nature of disciplining operates on a symbolic level, rather than necessarily also representing a reality in women’s lives – discourse does not equal practice. In the wedding ritual of the *Mandilón* (whipped man) dance, gender stereotypes are comically reversed: At one of the weddings I attended, this took the form that the cowboy-hat donning bride whipped the groom with a leather belt,

while the groom feigned femininity by carrying a baby doll on his back. Yet in everyday situations, role reversals are often considered unacceptable, as this shows a lack of respect for the social order. For instance, when Estrella's daughter-in-law disciplined her, she violated the principle of seniority, leading to their estrangement (see also the section on chaos below).

Defenderse

At their mother's birthday party, Xochitl slapped her twin brother Esteban – for no apparent reason. The slap rang so loudly that Estrella, a 60-year-old guest, exclaimed the feisty 20-year-old should leave Esteban in peace, as just the sound was painful to hear. Esteban later admitted that it hurt for a while and it took him a lot of self-control not to retaliate in front of the guests. This kind of gratuitous violence was uncommon enough to attract comments, and Estrella and Socorro laughed when they chatted about the event later. Yet given that their father used to beat their mother, which made Esteban feel angry and powerless, he is proud of having trained his sister to “defend herself” by introducing her to the art of fighting.

“*Defendersé*” is a very common expression in everyday parlance and is a key word in human rights discourses. It is also associated with the Revolution and ongoing political struggles over land rights (e.g. Bastian Duarte 2011; Garcés Jiménez 2014). Thus, the twins did not speak of their mutual acts of physical violence as “domestic violence”, but rather as a form of raucous fun and necessary training for other fights. Though asserting oneself through brute force is oft referred to as a *macho*, and thus “masculine,” behaviour in Milpa Alta, Xochitl's example shows that it is not actually limited to men.

Like *castigo*, *defensa* is carried out by both males and females, but typically expresses itself according to gendered norms. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the Tlacotecan sociologist asserted that when an unburdened man walks in front of his wife with a stick, while she is carrying a heavy load, this is in order for him to protect her from potentially lethal rattlesnake attacks. According to his logic, a husband has the obligation to protect and defend his wife, while a mother has the obligation to protect and defend the family. To illustrate the latter claim, Father Jesús called a family into the room whilst I was interviewing him, winking at me to listen in. The family greeted me as they came in and the priest led the family father to the wall, where he made the man, presumably in his

early forties, repeat a pledge not to use drugs again. While Father Jesús spoke energetically, facing the man, the man stared at the wall blankly, repeating the priest's words in a low voice. Father Jesús told him that Christ would be his cure and gave him a small image of Christ as a keepsake. Then the man stepped back and the wife politely asked Father Jesús for advice regarding her teenage son, not present, who worried her, as he was staying out late. Father Jesús said that a boy behaves like that if he does not have anyone watching over him at home. He tousled the little son's hair, perhaps four years old, before bidding the family good-bye. The mother gave Father Jesús a few coins on her way out. When they stepped out, the priest closed the door, and whispered that this shows how women hold a family together, suffering and working hard for it. He did not seem to reflect on his own role in reproducing this tendency by reinforcing the mother's guilt towards her son.

In addition, all *comuneros* (stakeholders to the communal land), male and female, share the obligation to protect the forest, land, and waters from external threats, such as mining companies and paper factories. For reasons of space, I will not go into Mexico's complex history of successive land reforms and multiple Indigenous rebellions demanding access to land, which other anthropologists have explored in great depth (see Bartra 1993; Friedrich 1970). Yet it is worth noting that a group of Tlacotencans founded the Association of the Constituents of 1917 on 17 November 1974, "whose members swore to defend the mountains as communal property as an hereditary right, to realise the defence in accordance with the Constitution, and to do so with intelligence, and if it came to it, with their own lives" (Delegación Milpa Alta 2011: 78, my translation).

Note that, while *defensa* is a common topic of conversation, Milpaltenses disagree on what is expected of husbands and wives, and they do not necessarily honour those expectations in practice. The father cured by Father Jesús had been unable to defend his family because of his addiction. Similarly, a young mother descended into depression and alcoholism after her husband kicked her out to the criticism of her older female friends. Men or women who are not seen as defending themselves and their families, including those whose partners are unfaithful to them, are often denigrated as "*pendejos*", or "*pendejas*" (idiots). Leaving one's spouse is rarely considered to be justifiable and does not count as a form of defence. Other individuals have no desire to defend themselves or others, and abandon their families, or pollute and exploit the environment.

Control

As with *castigo* and *defensa*, different forms of control are more closely associated with men than with women and vice versa. Men are more likely to control a family's wealth, including bank accounts and land titles. They also often control their partner's or children's social and physical mobility. Socorro remembered her father fondly, while also citing him as a reason why she rarely goes out and never chose to marry: When Socorro's reserved mother was greeted by a man walking past their house, her jealous father screamed at her, "How come this man knows you?" Estrella joked, "That's why he built your house in the shadows. 'Not even the sun may touch my daughter!'" Controlling behaviour particularly affected older women, who had to seek their husband's permission in order to work outside of the family home, but also affected many younger women. For example, I spoke to a Tlacotense woman who showed me her diploma in Women's Rights. She highlighted her husband's generosity in allowing her to dance with the *tlacuáleras*, but now that she has children she no longer goes. Yet after she left, her mother blamed the husband, a well-paid police officer, for pressuring her to leave work, effectively depriving her of her rights. In addition, *chisme* (gossip), which is typically associated with women and viewed negatively, may also limit women's movement: Many women do not want their families and neighbours to denigrate them as a "*pata de perro*" (dogfoot) or "*vaga*" (tramp), for wasting time going about without a purpose, for their own selfish pleasure.³⁴ While men may contribute to such "gossip", they are rarely accused of doing so.

In local discourse, there are also types of feminine control over males, including: sexual seduction; knowledge of medicinal and noxious herbs; monitoring other family members' health, for instance, through *temazcal*-bathing (dome-like sweat-lodge); and cooking. I will discuss these in the following chapter. For both sexes, hard work is a key way of cultivating self-discipline, but while men mainly acquire self-discipline by working in the fields, or in their respective jobs, women cultivate self-discipline not only in wage labour, but also via a range of traditional arts, such as weaving and dancing.

³⁴ Perhaps it goes without saying that as an ethnographer, I inevitably fell into this category of mobile woman, which limited whom I could speak to: most of my female interlocutors had themselves experiences of travelling beyond the confines of Milpa Alta.

Chaos

Categorising chaos-oriented actions is somewhat futile, as they are precisely unpredictable, unstructured, and anti-social, but common terms include: *abuso* (abuse), *pelea* (fight), *falta* (fault), and *dejarse* (allowing mistreatment). Such actions are either said to be caused by an imbalance, such as excessive negative emotions, or excessive drinking, or may constitute acts of revenge. None of these are associated with a particular gender. While anti-social acts threaten the social balance, they may, under certain circumstances, promote change, and therefore have positive potential. As one environmental and social activist from Villa Milpa Alta said, “*en la crisis hay oportunidad*” (the crisis also offers opportunity).

In particular, Milpaltenses of all ages and both genders expressed great rage and fear about what Farmer (2005) and others may refer to as “structural violence”, including infrastructural problems, threatened land rights, and environmental damage. For instance, when I surveyed and group-interviewed two *preparatoria* (high school) classes and a *secundaria* (middle-school) class about their greatest concerns regarding life in Milpa Alta, they frequently highlighted environmental issues, such as pollution and access to water. One student wrote, “The most important problems my pueblo faces are the imbalance of the pueblo, whether it is the damage to the streets [...], or the people who drop their garbage in public places and the lack of care towards plants” (my translation). Another statement made the aforementioned link between caring for the environment, communal values, and human wellbeing explicit:

values have been lost and the people are very dirty [...] the streets ought to be clean out of respect for the people and out of respect for the environment we should not trash it [...] it is thanks to our environment (trees, plants, etcetera) that we can live healthily with less risk of illness, thanks to a cleaner and pure environment (my translation).

A key type of *falta* was showing a lack of respect. Mild disrespect might be deployed in jest to signal dissatisfaction: one elderly husband characterised this as having his wife tell him, “*ximochapani*” or “*échaté*” (dump yourself), instead of using the reverential forms “*ximotlalitzjino*” or “*por favor, siéntese usted*” (please take a seat). For the most part, Milpaltenses, except perhaps the youngest and most rebellious, frowned upon being

disrespectful to elders, and particularly to mothers. As a Tlacotecan Nahuatl scholar told me, not using the reverential form of Nahuatl in talking to one's mother is committing an act of violence against her.

One evening, Socorro, Estrella, and I had tea and sweet *elote* (tender corncob) tamales together. Estrella mentioned her disbelief over her friend, Doña Luz's, death. Luz used to go to the communal gym with her and was still full of life, despite her advanced age of 88 years. However, her granddaughters disrespected her: Luz told them to avoid making "*un tiradero*" (a mess) in her house, but they told her she had no authority to say so, as their father had built the house. So Luz went to the bathroom with *coraje* (rage), had a stroke, and fell into a coma from which she never woke again. After a month, her family decided to switch off the machine, as they feared she was suffering. The granddaughters expressed remorse over having "killed" their grandmother. Socorro said that this is a guilt they will live with for the rest of their lives. Estrella added that their father also was responsible, as he had never scolded the girls for anything.

In sum, disrespect upsets the social *orden* and triggers *coraje*, which may give the disrespected elder a stroke, a heart attack, an inflammation, or other serious conditions. To prevent this, Milpaltenses often foregrounded the value of respect in educating their children. Returning from the weaving workshop, I asked a Tlacotecan participant, Lizbeth, what violence was, in her opinion. She answered that there were many kinds of violence: physical, emotional, psychological, and so on, echoing Inmujeres' violence definition, but then added that there is violence which is not recognised as such. She said she raised her sons not to call people by devaluing names, such as "*gordita*" (fatty) or "*vieja*" (old girl), which she thinks can be hurtful to those they are used against. It should be noted that some maintain such epithets are playful and affectionate, rather than disrespectful. So the best way of preventing violence is to start at the root of the problem and provide children with an education to respect others, especially elders, according to Lizbeth.

On a separate occasion, Estrella said of her husband's sister-in-law, "*tengo un odio contra ella como no te imaginas*" (I feel more hate for her than you can imagine). Estrella used to perform with the *tlacuateras* until a fateful day last year when the group was getting ready to perform for a group that was already watching them expectantly. So she was just adjusting her beautiful new beaded *faja* (women's belt), when her sister-in-law started

pulling at it, “*se vio como me jaloneó la faja de chaquira frente a todo el público... me morí de vergüenza*” (you could see how she pulled my beaded belt in front of all the spectators... I died of embarrassment). Estrella said that she could have hit (*dar trancazos*) or kicked her (*dar patadas*), but held back, as that would have caused a scandal and might have gotten the performance cancelled by the organizers. Her sister-in-law’s family witnessed the event but did not intervene. Estrella’s daughter congratulated her for not reacting because she knew that Estrella was very capable of reacting forcefully. Her sister-in-law never apologised and Estrella never returned to the *tlacuáleras*. The sister-in-law would say that Estrella was in the wrong because the beaded belt was “inauthentic”, but Estrella insisted that it was really about envy, as beaded belts are expensive. Having listened to Estrella’s story, Socorro commented that the sister-in-law thinks along the lines of “*solamente mis chicharrones truenan*” (“only my pork rind crackles”; meaning: what I say is right, no matter what), referring to an inability to acknowledge one’s mistakes and apologise. Everyone agreed that there is nothing worse than to be fighting within the family. The sister-in-law has not visited Estrella’s home since the incident and Estrella has only recently begun acting as a proper host, rather than vacating the premises, when her-brother-in-law comes to visit her husband. This example shows that disrespecting someone is an action directed towards destroying order, and generating conflict, the consequences of which may never be undone.

As mentioned above, in cases of intimate partner violence, most Milpaltenses say that *abuso* must not be answered by *dejarse*. Socorro said she used to fight a lot with her younger sister, and they would grab each other by the braids. I said what worries me is that women might get used to violence and end up with a violent husband. She then told me the story of her cousin who had a boyfriend whose father had a reputation for being violent. Then one day, the cousin was turning her head around and the boyfriend slapped her because he thought she was staring at some guy, which she was not. He promised he would not act like this again, but Socorro’s mother told the girl, “*no te conviene casarte con este muchacho*” (it’s not a good idea for you to get married to this boy). Nonetheless, she did marry him and came to regret it, as he would beat her over any little thing. Eventually she said, “*ya no aguanto más*” (I can’t take it anymore) and left him, even though she was pregnant at the time. Socorro’s bottom line was, “*no te dejes*” (don’t let it happen to you). Women should instead stand up for themselves and fight back.

(Dis)order

The above distinction between order and chaos is artificial, not only in the sense that Milpaltenses do not compare and contrast these different actions systematically, but also in the sense that most actions contain an element of the other analytical class of actions within them – some more than others. As one would expect, femicides, such as the one in the opening vignette, are outside of the norm and are associated with chaos. Recall, for instance, the priest’s remark about “big city” violence coming to Milpa Alta, the city standing for a place where people do not know and love each other and Milpaltense values do not apply. To my knowledge, nobody claimed that it served the victim right, even though whispered comments, such as “I heard she was having an affair”, did suggest an element of victim-blaming. From an analytical perspective, Adelita had been seen to be acting independently from, rather than interdependently with, her husband. Similarly, if she had been killed by a taxi driver, as some suspected, this would confirm the common notion that women should not run around “*de vagas*.”

And so, Adelita’s case also might be seen as order-generating on the community level, in the sense that femicides impact on women’s mobility both directly and indirectly. The fear generated by living close to a crime scene alters men’s, but above all women’s, general sense of safety, in particular with respect to femicide. Even before Adelita’s death, my female friends rarely boarded taxis alone, less so at night, and definitely no *piratas*. In the weeks immediately after it, they made sure that I went home accompanied after dark. “Drive her home”, they told Amparo’s son one night. Other times, we braved the road uphill in a group of three women. We had been reminded that demonstrating independence and mobility was risky. Of all the ways in which men may choose to control their wives’, sisters’ and daughters’ movements, femicide is the most extreme, subjecting female bodies to eternal immobility – only their bodies. By haunting the living literally and figuratively, the dead may travel far.

In as much as Adelita’s death might have contributed to a certain order, and was situated within the web of meaning of her life story and of national femicide statistics, it may have carried a certain meaning, which may have diverged between Milpaltenses and *extracomunitario* feminist observers. What for many Milpaltenses was a sign of chaos, was

described as systemic patriarchal violence by Inmujeres. At the same time, it would be equally accurate to say that this act of violence, as it manifested itself to the *pueblo*, was unreadable, uncertain, and gave rise to considerable confusion and feelings of insecurity among Tlacotencans, imposing an affective curfew on myself and my female friends in the first few weeks after it happened.

Silent violence

I realised early into my fieldwork that defining what “gender-based violence” or “violence against women” means in Milpa Alta was going to be challenging. Not only did there appear to be different definitions within Inmujeres – the six types of violence found on Inmujeres posters and the narrower practical definition focussing on physical and emotional violence – but these definitions also did not appear to map onto local views. Even asking Milpaltenses about their views proved problematic, as “violence” was not a topic easily breached in polite conversation – but more in terms of the performativity of the word, than in terms of what it might denote. The word field “*violencia*” (violence), “*violento/a*” (violent), and “*violentar*” (to act violently against someone) barely came up organically, as the social situation determined the register and vocabulary available for the description of violence. Notably, “violence,” in its wider sense, does not have an exact correspondence in the Nahuatl language, as spoken by the older segment of Milpaltense society. Among Nahuas in Alto Balsas, Guerrero, the closest equivalent to a term for violence is *tlabuelli*, meaning “anger, problem, conflict” in Nahuatl (Raby 2015). For Nahuas in Veracruz, this concept is so significant that they even speak of the fearful spirit *tlabuelilo* (anger) which haunts those who have lost their emotional balance (Sandstrom 1991: 267). “Gender violence” and “structural violence” are of course more technical terms that would not be used in everyday parlance anyway.

For example, when a husband beats and leaves a woman, she would be unlikely to speak of “violence” or of being a “victim”. Several divorced women instead spoke of “abuse” and of having “felt like a *pendeja* (idiot)”. As I will describe in Chapter 5, victimhood was often stigmatised as it signaled dependency and passivity instead of interdependency and activity, providing another reason to avoid speaking of “violence”, as this evoked victimhood. Much as there was social pressure to avoid conflict, and people

who were viewed as instigating conflict were denigrated as “*conflictivos*”, people were generally reluctant to intervene in cases of domestic abuse. Accordingly, often it was only when beatings left visible marks that battered women’s relatives felt justified in intervening on their behalf. In some cases, this took the form of vigilantism, but often it simply involved the woman returning to her natal home, as in the abovementioned example of Socorro’s cousin. Male authority figures, such as the *coordinador territorial* (local equivalent of a town mayor) or the priest were often asked to help couples reconcile, but it was very unusual for the police to get involved in a domestic dispute, perhaps because some cops were wife-beaters themselves, as had certainly been true in one case, according to the cop’s son. A petite woman in her early thirties, who had twice narrowly escaped being assaulted by a group of junkies in Tlacotenco, fruitlessly petitioned for more frequent patrols in her neighbourhood and wrote about her experience on the town’s Facebook page in order to at least warn others: “In times of crisis, knowing and helping each other among neighbours is fundamental.” Instead of presenting herself as a victim, she thus wrote of a threat to the community and collective action. She also did not use the term “violence”, but specifically wrote of “assault” (*asalto*), “fear” (*miedo*), and “crisis”.

In general, people often referred to violence-related concepts, such as “beating”, “fighting”, “impatience”, “rude”, “rough”, “vulgar”, “malevolent”, and “suffering”, but the adjective “violent” only came up when talking about an event in the media that took place somewhere else, or long ago. For example, people referred to the violence of the Spanish Invasion, the violence of the cartels, or the violence of the state towards rural people, like when the *nabual’s* apprentice Juan spoke of “violence, roboticism, and insensibility towards the planet” in one breath. Yet even with these topics, other terms were used more frequently, such as “*complicado*” (complicated, difficult), “*lucha*” (fight, struggle), and “*crimen de estado*” (crimes of the state). This may have reflected a wider tendency in Mexico: for example, a Mexico-City museum on the Holocaust and other genocides (which barely mentions Mexico’s drug war deaths) was aspirationally, or perhaps euphemistically, named “the Museum of Memory and Tolerance” (*Museo de Memoria y Tolerancia*).

I cautiously experimented with labelling things Milpaltense friends mentioned in conversation as “violent” actions, to see how they would react. For instance, a friend contemplated throwing Molotov cocktails to thwart a political opponent’s campaign. On

another day, the *tlacuateras* were rehearsing a song about threatening a squirrel, which goes, “*mitzontlatlacueponiliz, mitzonnacatamaluz*” (I’ll shoot you, I’ll make a meat tamale of you!), if the squirrel did not desist from stealing seeds from the field. When I suggested that acting on these things might be considered “violent” actions, I did not receive any real answer – not even that my suggestion was stupid. I concluded that “violence” was either a dirty word, or meaningless – an impression that may well have been an artefact of being a female researcher, as women’s conversations are often politer than men’s.

Yet there are always exceptions. As a middle-aged widow with adult sons, Ana could afford not to observe the rules of propriety as closely as other Milpaltense women. One evening, she got up to leave a choir meeting and suggested that if she took to the streets any later, she might run into a rapist, but she halted while finishing the word, realising that she had scandalised the other ladies. So Ana decided to lighten the mood by adding a rape joke on top: “*flojita y tranquila, para que no te duele*” (relaxed and quiet, so it doesn’t hurt you). I found out later that in reality, she had mainly been afraid of missing a telenovela, which she had become addicted to after her husband’s death.

While people rarely spoke about violence in earnest, it did come up in jest. For example, the Nahuatl church choir leader admonished the women to sing properly and made them harmonise. Once he was satisfied with the result, he told them to sing like that henceforth, or else “*se les aviento mi guitarra*” (I will throw my guitar at you), and the laughing women responded with the neologism, “*nos das un guitarronazo*” (you’re going to whack us with the guitar). Threats of this kind were very common and entirely acceptable in the context of banter.

The widespread silence on this subject otherwise may in part be explained by the Aztecs and their descendants having frequently been characterised as “violent” people: Rather than defining violence, violence has defined them (Lopez Austin and Lopez Lujan 2008). Milpaltenses occasionally challenged this harmful stereotype, and even turned it on its head. Juan, for example, drew a connection between the Spanish Invasion and the emergence of machismo, gender violence, and STDs in Mexico, claiming that before, women were respected. “The Spanish repressed their women, here we did not.” Juan idealised the ancestors and drew on colonial-period missionary texts to substantiate his claims: “*los europeos escribieron de los antepasados que eran como niños, tenían un pensamiento de amor,*

como Cristo” (the Europeans wrote of the ancestors that they were like children, they had a loving way of thinking, like Christ).

When I asked one of my Nahuatl language teachers what he thought violence was for the Aztecs, he pondered it and then started with, “it’s when someone does something bad upon another”. And then he spoke of *castigos* (punishments), which is to say physical mutilation or lynchings, for crimes like adultery or robbery. He didn’t know if *castigos* should be considered “violence” or not, as he considered these to be rooted in “*in cualli in yectli*” (the good and the perfect) as the Mexica concept of law and morality. Milpaltenses were often reluctant to speak of “*violencia*”, not only because it is associated with impolite speech, but also because of a sense of the particular moral load of the concept of “violence” itself, as this last example suggests. Worded differently, violent actions may be evaluated positively or negatively, but the term *violencia* has a negative connotation. Accordingly, violence was conceptualised and understood by my Milpaltense interlocutors, but could only be alluded to in most social situations.

CREATIVE VIOLENCE AND FEMININITY³⁵

The notion that violence is neither inherently bad nor good is substantiated further by the common association of Milpaltense femininity with the potential for violence. Over lunch, I asked my friend Sebastián, a gangly young cook, who had only recently moved to the small, particularly conservative Milpaltense pueblo of San Francisco Tecoxpa, what it was like to date Milpaltense women. He responded it was challenging: “*¡Las chicas de aquí son bien rudas!*” (The girls here are rough!) Laughing, he explained that they were direct to the point of being aggressive and did not take any nonsense. Rather than bemoan it, he respected this trait, recalling his own father’s machismo and women’s need to stand up against such treatment.

On a symbolic level, Milpaltenses frequently linked femininity to motherhood, and motherhood to both serpents and virgins, thereby interweaving Hispanic Catholic and Aztec imagery. Discussing each of these symbols in turn, I will show that the violent aspect of this imagined femininity was associated with both creative and destructive

³⁵ This section is a shorter, revised version of a published chapter (Whittaker 2017).

potential, working both towards order and chaos. Hence, feminine violence, as I encountered it in everyday conversations, ordinary interactions, folk tales, and religious ritual, was often presented as ambiguous, rather than already having a moral charge.

Mothers

Milpaltense motherhood did not necessarily map onto being a biological mother, as most children called several women “*mamá*”: their mother and their two grandmothers, or whoever else was mothering them. Given that women often married young – Bety was only 13 years old – and worked or studied away from home during the day, they depended on the help of experienced female relatives to look after their children and to teach them how to master their motherhood and housekeeping chores. For instance, Ana’s daughter-in-law learned cooking from her, and lived under her roof for the first years of being “*juntada*” (living with her partner)³⁶, as was also the case for Ámparo’s daughter-in-law. Thus, the mother-in-law was often a great help, but, as Father Jesús explained, also potentially “creates conflict for the new marriage... the granny can influence a lot... she is the one who already lived, who has authority”. This is such a common trope that, as my friend Lizbeth explained, there are flowers called “*la nuera y la suegra*” (the daughter-in-law and the mother-in-law): they represent how “the son is in the middle” and the mother-in-law bothers the married couple.

Over the past decades, family sizes have shrunk considerably, after government campaigns sought to curb Indigenous women’s reproductivity³⁷, with few mothers today giving birth to more than three children. Indeed, Socorro’s sister expressed shock when she met a woman with ten children in tow. In the past, and in the few remaining large families, older female siblings took over some of the mothering responsibilities for younger siblings, and were also often referred to as “*mamás*” – as was the case with Don Pablo’s older sister after their mother died. Girls were often colloquially addressed as “*mamasitas*”, signalling that all females were potential mothers. Accordingly, childless women, such as Socorro, often drew attention to their mothering qualities in caring for younger kin, or in their creative activities. In most people’s narratives, being a *mamá*

³⁶ Milpaltenses often use this term for free unions interchangeably with “*casada*” (married) and treat such couples as if they were legally married.

³⁷ See Smith-Oka (2013) for an extensive analysis of discriminatory Mexican fertility politics.

referred to the performative role of mothering³⁸ and was viewed positively, whereas the more impersonal term *madre* usually referred to mothers in the strict biological sense and was featured in various negative colloquialisms, such as *desmadre* (catastrophe) or *estar hasta la madre* (being fed up) (cf. Bakewell 2011)³⁹. The ambivalence of motherhood was thus already evident in the juxtaposition between *mamá* and *madre*.

In addition to often having multiple *mamás*, Milpaltense children were also watched over by a host of female goddesses and saints, with both creative and dangerous powers. St. Anne, the Virgin Mary, and St. Martha, among other Christian saints, were venerated in the same place where the ancestors worshipped deities with similar attributes, including the gender-fluid earth monster, Tlaltecuhli (lady/lord of the earth)⁴⁰, the giver and taker of lives. These divine mothers reflected and gave meaning to their earthly counterparts: Father Jesús explained that the mother is the head of the family, much like the Virgin of Guadalupe, divine representation of Mexican motherhood, is the central focus of Mexican Catholic devotion (cf. León 2004). He then compared Guadalupe with Mother Earth, providing her human children with food and medicinal plants, just as mothers traditionally cook, care and heal. At the same time, women, divine and earthly, were also often perceived as potentially transgressive figures. Here, too, Aztec religion may have had an influence: female divinities were tasked with preventing stasis and enabling regeneration through destructive and disruptive actions⁴¹. Historically, then, (female) transgression was not viewed as purely negative.

Local historians have suggested that Toci (“our grandmother”), an Aztec earth goddess, has been succeeded by St. Anne, mother of the Virgin Mary, and patron of Santa Ana Tlacotenco. The image of St. Anne in Tlacotenco shows Christ’s grandmother

³⁸ Note, however, that the performativity of mothering is limited to the female sex. Where fathers are primary caregivers, they are not acting as *mamás*, but redefining the role of being *papás*.

³⁹ Similar observations hold true for the distinction between *papá* and *padre*, with the difference that *padre* is used positively in Mexican slang: e.g., *qué padre!* (How marvelous!)

⁴⁰ The feminine version of the earth monster is depicted as crouching in a birthing position in pre-Hispanic iconography. She wears skulls strapped on her back while facing the sky with her mighty serpent-like, fanged jaws opened wide, and she has additional jaws on her joints (Henderson 2007: 28). Giving life was a battle against death for mother and infant, and mothers who died in birth were given a warrior’s respect (Matos Moctezuma 2010: 152-155). Tlaltecuhli is a gender-neutral name and may equally be translated as “lord of the earth”. Miller and Taube’s interpretation of the earth monster as a female deity is based on their reading of iconographic depictions (1993: 167; see also Lopez Luján 2010).

⁴¹ Alfredo López Austin (Instituto de Investigaciones Antropológicas, National University of Mexico (UNAM)), personal communication, 12 October 2014.

holding the infant Mary, and is adorned with traditional woven hairbands and belts (Sociedad de Experimentación 2014: 11-13). Both Toci and Saint Anne, as well as the Virgin Mary, were reverentially addressed as *Tonantzín*, “our mother,” and were associated with weaving and childbirth, and with *temazcales* (dome-shaped sweat lodges). All three attributes were associated with fertility. On her feast day, many hundreds of pilgrims came from all over Milpa Alta to ask St. Anne for help in conceiving, or to thank her for having been blessed with, a child. During my fieldwork, I only encountered mention of Toci once at a supposedly Chichimeca-style, large *temazcal* ceremony under the earth in San Juan Tepenahuac, where she and two other Aztec goddesses, Cihuacoatl, introduced as “mother earth”, and Tlahzolteotl, introduced as the “goddess of love”, were represented by women from the group to carry out ritual functions, such as make speeches, sing, or pour water onto the red-hot stones. The master of ceremony described us as being “back in the womb of mother earth”. Those present affirmed that taking part in *temazcal* ceremonies is good for one’s physical and spiritual health. At the *nabual*’s smaller, more typical *temazcal* in Villa Milpa Alta, the apprentice Juan explained to me that it is custom for grandmothers to be the ones to bathe their families at night because they are the ones who have the knowledge in the family and represent the moon, forming a bond with the female moon across the navel-like opening at the top of the *temazcal* to their navels. This, he said, gives grandmothers the power to keep their families healthy and fertile.

Snakes

When displeased with their devotees’ conduct, female saints revealed their dangerous, serpent-like side. According to Rocio, a middle-aged shopkeeper and grandmother, St. Anne is both “*viborera*” (commands serpents) and “*milagrosa*” (works miracles), which means that “you have to be careful with her”. She recounted the story of a young woman from Villa Milpa Alta who refused to go to the feast of Santa Ana Tlacotenco with her family because she disliked the neighbouring town, so that her grandmother made her wash the dishes as punishment. When the young woman lifted a bunch of plates, she found a serpent coiled underneath and dropped the plates in fright. She then called some men for help, but though they searched thoroughly, the snake could not be found. So her grandmother declared it was a sign from St. Anne that she must go to her feast, which she finally did. Rocio added a second tale: Her husband had wanted to join a folkloric

dance group as a boy in order to entertain St. Anne on her feast day, but his father refused because he could not afford to buy him the suit and was too ashamed to allow his son to borrow one instead. Then a snake with a golden crown appeared to the father while he was working in the field and chased him in upright posture. So he finally realised that St. Anne was angry and that he should allow his son to dance in her honour.

In other stories, St. Martha may also send snakes in punishment for not attending her festival: According to the famed storyteller, Luz Jiménez, “When a mass was not offered on her feast day, she sent down snakes of water. When her feast day went well, then there were no frightful rain storms or lightning nor did it thunder” (cit. in Horcasitas 1972: 75). Not showing regard for St. Martha’s celebration, was to show her disrespect, which, as I have mentioned previously, was considered a form of violence. Rocio also commented that the Virgin of the Ascension is associated with snakes, as she is depicted with a snake under her feet. In Christian iconography, the snake represents the Devil being crushed by Mary, but Milpaltenses often read the snake in terms of local folk tales, thus representing the motherly saints’ ability to both protect and chastise their children, mirroring earthly mothers’ right (in principle) to chastise even their adult children physically for disrespectful behaviour and other serious failings.

Rattlesnakes and vipers physically surrounded Milpaltenses in their daily life, presenting an ever-present threat to their lives, particularly when working in the corn fields. Unlike the ambivalent snake of traditional Nahua folk tales, the snakes in Milpaltense tales may also represent evil, consistent with Christian tradition. Miriam, in her early forties, told me the following in the manner of an autobiographical story: The greenish *cencuate* (corn-cob-snake), or Mexican pine snake (*Pituophis deppei deppei*), is said to be attracted by the smell of breastmilk and cow-milk. So the snake hypnotises mothers into giving it their breast, while it pacifies the baby with the tip of its tail. This may lead to the baby starving to death. According to Miriam, her family had to chase it away from her house just after she had given birth to her daughter. When I asked Socorro about the *cencuate*, she shuddered and reported that a woman from a neighbouring town had been bitten lethally while breastfeeding. Other people spoke of *cencuates* as an amusing memory from the past, like something that used to be common, but is not anymore. Most people seemed to think there was a grain of truth to the story. The threat of the *cencuate*, whether real or imaginary, warned young mothers to be vigilant and protect their child from

insidious evil. Though it was increasingly common for women to work outside the home, they were often criticized strongly for “neglecting” their children by sending them to kindergarten, and many Milpaltenses expressed that even fathers should not care for children on their own⁴². From an analytical viewpoint, the symbol of the bosom snake may also have enshrined a particular kind of ambivalence: The sacrifices of mothering may go to waste if those cared for eventually turn against you⁴³.

Many more mythical snakes populated Milpaltense folk tales. For example, some Tlacotencans, such as the choir ladies, spoke of viper oil as a myth, others, such as the *tlacuateras*, mentioned it as part of the traditional medicinal knowledge: Viper oil supposedly quickened hair-growth and made hair grow to unusual lengths. The catch was that the oiled hair was thought to attract lightning and moved autonomously during the storm, risking to strangle its owner. A remedy against the deadly consequences of viper oil use that one *tlacuatera* mentioned was fastening a cross into the hair. To wit, the viper oil tales seemed to articulate an ambivalent attitude to feminine beauty, which was both desirable and dangerous, as it could lead to a path of self-destruction.

Virgins

Virginity is also a key feminine symbol in Milpa Alta, as may be observed during the yearly changing of St. Anne’s precious robes by virgin, or, at least, symbolically virgin, maidens. As the choir ladies said, the robe-changers must be discreet and are not allowed to talk about the process, for nobody else may know what lies underneath the clothes of the saint who seemingly paradoxically, is oft referred to as a “virgin”, despite being the Virgin Mary’s mother.⁴⁴ In her landmark study of Mexican morality, Marit Melhuus explains:

⁴² The narrative contexts suggested that the *cencuate* may have served to explain diverse phenomena, such as scarcity of milk, incest, sudden child death syndrome, or infanticide, but evidence is scarce on this matter.

⁴³ The virtually pan-European proverb “to nourish a viper in one’s bosom” (Span., *criar la víbora en el seno*), means that kindness to the evil will be repaid with betrayal. It derives from Aesop’s fable “The Farmer and the Viper”, in which the male farmer plays the hapless mothering role. Note that the *cencuate* only preys on females. The story of the suckling snake travelled to Mexico with the Spanish conquistadors, and is a wide-spread folk legend in contemporary rural Spain (Rubio et al. 2007).

⁴⁴ In terms of Christian tradition, St. Anne’s virginity may also be taken literally: Since the Medieval period, the Original Sin was thought to be passed on from generation to generation through sexual intercourse. Therefore, apocryphal legends emerged that Mary was conceived without the Original Sin through “Immaculate Conception” (Holweck 1907).

“The Virgin is, perhaps, the symbol of femininity. ... This symbolism is ambiguous. It underscores the pure state that women should aspire to while at the same time it upholds motherhood as the quintessence of womanhood” (1992: 14). In any case, the same dressing procedure applies to other Virgins of the area: For instance, the Virgin of the Ascension of Tlacotenco was dressed in a traditional outfit with *rebozo* (shawl) on her feast day, whereas the main figure in Milpa Alta was bedded on roses and apples, the latter representing an abundant harvest. Socorro recalled one time when the *mayordomos* of the Virgin of the Miracles were fruitlessly trying to attach new earrings to the figure, until they spotted Socorro and made her, never married, do it. Lo and behold, the earrings stuck (see fig. 14). When Socorro recounted this tale to her choir friends, they seemed astonished by this proof of her virginity past the age of sixty. Male saints were changed by men, who need not be virgins. It was generally uncommon to apply the term “virgin” to a man, as their sexual purity was not a matter of consequence.



FIGURE 14: VIRGIN OF THE ASSUMPTION STATUETTE ADORNED WITH A GOLDEN CROWN, A WIG, EARRINGS, A WOVEN RIBBON AND AN EMBROIDERED CAPE

The prescriptions about who may dress saints hence correspond to folk Hispanic Catholic sexual mores: According to Melhuus (1996), men build their reputation by taking on a political office or religious *cargos*, whereas women's reputation hinges on their symbolic virginity. However, this distinction did not fully apply in Milpa Alta, as men took on *cargos* in tandem with their wives. Given that women could also take this path to virtue, and that my fieldwork took place nearly 20 years after Melhuus's, my interlocutors disagreed on the significance of sexual intercourse before marriage. For example, Yolotl's mother labelled such women as "*fracasadas*" (fallen women), while Socorro valued her virginity as well as her friendship with younger women who had not made the same moral choices. Certainly after marriage, most opined that women should be faithful to their husband and dutiful, as in Melhuus's study. In Milpa Alta, opinions differed on whether women should also be moderate with respect to marital sex: the linguist appeared to regret having married a morally upright, virgin-like woman. Following Melhuus, if widowed, a woman should ideally avoid a second marriage, and often, sons made it their responsibility to watch over their widowed mother's chastity. This was also attested in my Milpaltense friends' personal accounts: Though her husband was alive and well, Estrella's son had already warned her that he would not allow her to remarry, should she become a widow. Following Melhuus, regardless of whether they were actual virgins, women performed symbolic virginity by signalling prestige-giving fecundity and willingness to suffer for their family (ibid.: 15).

For the rural Colombian men in Gabriel García Márquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* (1987), symbolic virginity was not about having ascertained a woman's chastity beyond doubt, but about saving face, and by extension, their masculinity. Similarly, Milpaltense men, more than the women themselves, risked losing face through women's rumoured promiscuity, even if baseless. *Cabrones* (betrayed husbands) could either restore their honour by challenging their alleged rival to combat, or in some cases, *carnales* (Mexican slang for "bros", literally, "of one flesh", i.e., close friends) and family members also avenged each other. For example, a hot-headed mariachi bandmate of a more docile young man whose wife had left him for a hunky ex-bandmate took over the fighting role for him, as it was an opportunity to demonstrate his loyalty as well as vent off a longstanding grudge against their former friend. However, none of the physical aggression was directed against the estranged wife, who had been fed up with being the main breadwinner of her family while her husband took over childcare and frequently went on

benders with his mates. As the speculation around Lupita's femicide showed, killing an unfaithful wife was not viewed as a pathway to restoring male honour, but as a terrible crime.

So the symbolic virginity of mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters was often a matter of control, which was necessary, not so much because the women themselves were not trusted, but because the individual woman's virtue was irrelevant to her perceived virginity, given the ever-present danger of malevolent gossip. As emotional responses, such as jealousy, were not gendered, women incidentally also guarded their husbands from other women and occasionally attacked rivals or publically accused them via graffiti, as I observed on several occasions (see fig. 15). In a shame-based moral system, unlike a guilt-based one, people typically aligned their self-esteem with their community's overt judgment. Depending on whether they were being honoured or excluded by their community, such people will feel that they are intrinsically good or bad (cf. Benedict 1946). Therefore, by emphasising not only the "virginity" of their female saints but also of the women most closely associated with them, Milpaltenses signalled their honourableness as a people. Materialised as statues, the Virgins were efficacious images of communal virtue.



FIGURE 15: AN ANGRY TLACOTENSE WIFE'S GRAFFITI ACCUSING ANOTHER WOMAN (NAME BLACKED OUT) OF STEALING HER HUSBAND

Violent femininity and creative violence

There appeared to be a tension between divergent Milpaltense depictions of femininity and violence: the self-sacrificing, suffering virgin mother on the one side and the powerful, vengeful snake-like mother on the other side. These depictions occasionally mapped onto the speaker's religiosity, such as when the elderly devout Catholic widow Victoria performed a virgin-like femininity during our interview, but this was not always the case: for example, the middle-aged catechist Conchita embodied a more independent, mischievous femininity in our conversations. Moreover, Socorro told me about punitive feminine snakes tormenting her dreams, but pursued the ideal of a virgin-like femininity for her presentation of self. As Ang points out, "Certain modes of femininity are culturally more legitimate than others; and every woman knows subject positions she is best able to handle" (1990: 84). In other cases, the tensions between different kinds of femininities seemed to disappear, such as in Rocio's stories about female saints.

Thus, the interweaving of Catholic and Aztec symbolism has given rise to diverse narratives that combine feminine virtue, creativity, and lethal power. These are not necessarily separate good and bad sides: birth is a violent process and death may further regeneration. Similarly, the upholding of virtue may require violent intervention. As ordinary mothers were often considered to mirror the divine mothers' qualities, they, too, were attributed the ambivalent power to create and to destroy, to give and to demand, to care for others and to punish them. Therefore, Milpaltense femininity, divine and ordinary, exemplified the creative potential of violence, akin to the creative potential of love. I will explore these links further in the following chapter.

RETHINKING VIOLENCE

I will now reassess the four assumptions about violence at stake in the present chapter. Several theorists view violence as having certain inherent functions or meaning, such as being generative of religion (Bloch 1992), or generative of social exchange (Sahlins 1976). Similarly, Inmujeres considers violence to be generative of inequality between the sexes. In all of these cases, violence is ascribed a stable and narrow function or outcome. The presented material suggests instead that violence does not have inherent meaning, but may only be interpreted subjectively in light of its manifest effects within the specific social and symbolic context of its occurrence (cf. Dodd 2009). Thus, even where violence

ostensibly follows a “cultural logic”, this logic is not unequivocal or authoritative, but always emergent and embedded in a complex social world. Violence is perspectival and in constant flux.

For example, rather than having a clear meaning, Adelita’s femicide was overdetermined on a symbolic and affective level. It might contribute to “ordering” women’s conduct and draws additional meaning from the complexities of her personal trajectory and from national femicide statistics. Femicide controls female bodies’ mobility both directly in the instant of its occurrence and indirectly when it is remembered. Adelita’s death was met with considerable confusion and feelings of insecurity in her grieving community. Loaded with rage, fear, and the idiosyncrasies of experience, it was necessarily not fully available to logic. Only in retrospect could it be interpreted and judged by its material effects on the body and the social body, and thereby imbued with reason. Note that, because of its material and embodied effects, structural violence, such as the violence of pollution, is equally relevant to this discussion as interpersonal aggression. When violence had balancing, or even positive outcomes, Milpaltenses often did not judge it negatively, such as with respect to lynching. This dovetails with Whitehead’s (2004b) argument that violence is not necessarily a destructive force, but may also have sociopoetic effects.

Accordingly, “violence” was morally charged as a word, but not always as a social behaviour. It was often judged negatively when it was excessive, as in the example of Xochitl slapping her twin, though she herself considered it justified. Yet despite Inmujeres’ attempts to stabilise the meaning of violence as a negative phenomenon, violence was ambivalent, rather than bad or evil for most Milpaltenses, much as among Highland Indigenous peoples of the Andes (Harris 1998: 41). This ambivalence applied both to concrete occurrences of violence in everyday life and to the common folkloric association of femininity with the snake symbol. The local concepts I described above cannot be neatly slotted into moral categories of Biblical tradition – nor has violence historically been considered categorically evil in Christianity, but as a potential act of love (*caritas*) when employed as redemptive punishment or in service of conversion (Asad 2015). As the example of lynching shows, defensive acts in Milpa Alta and beyond were often considered to be in the interest of order, even “good”. While, in practice, many husbands treated their wives as their inferiors, many Milpaltenses disagreed with this, as

they often regarded men and women as equals in principle. But not all intimate violence was automatically condemned: Realising the communal ideal of interdependency required constant affirmation and the sanctioning of errant behaviour. Indeed, some said violence may even be meted out by the saints, if devotees fail to reciprocate the divine care received. I have also shown that in Milpaltense femininity, the potential for creation was associated with the potential for violence, as creation often depends on violence. Consequently, I suggest that it is more productive to speak of violence via the Milpaltense principles of order and chaos.

Note that “orderly” violence does not correspond to “legitimate violence” in Benjamin’s (1986) sense, as state authority has a weak hold on Milpa Alta. Raby’s (2012) concept of “legitimate violence” could potentially be applied to Milpa Alta, as the social imperative to *defenderse* suggests that people have an obligation to respond to a violation and people do appeal to higher authorities to contest their treatment – whether within the family, or involving village, or legal, authorities. Yet the language of legitimacy risks oversimplifying, and thus distorting, Milpaltense responses to state violence and neglect: understandings of violence are in flux and subject to constant dispute among Milpaltenses. The cosmological principles of order and chaos may partially illuminate how many Milpaltenses seek to understand violence, but they are also influenced by processes often associated with “modernity” or “globalisation” (cf. High 2015: 14): Illustrating this interweaving of multiple systems of meaning, a middle-school teacher in Tecómitl showed me several leaflets her class had designed on the topic of gender violence (see fig. 16). This graded assignment was in line with globalised feminist terminology and intended as a measure towards preventing violence and raising awareness of the issue. Yet note that violence against men was given equal space as violence against women on all of the leaflets, evoking the Milpaltense ideal of men and women being equally powerful, and therefore equally capable of violence in principle.

Thus, unlike Merry’s (2009) and Inmujeres’ representation of gendered violence, which highlighted gender inequality, Milpaltenses typically represented violence as gender-balanced, but also as gendered in the sense that some forms of violence were specifically attributed to members of the male or female gender, whether or not this conformed to their lived experiences. In other words, this gender balance appeared to be primarily symbolic. While some Milpaltense men like Sebastián claimed that they were

equal victims of violence and that women were “rough”, the severity of violence that these men spoke of was often dwarfed by the violences that emerged from women’s stories, as I will discuss in more depth in Chapter 5. Moreover, I only heard of one woman who killed a partner, while I heard multiple stories of femicides during fieldwork.

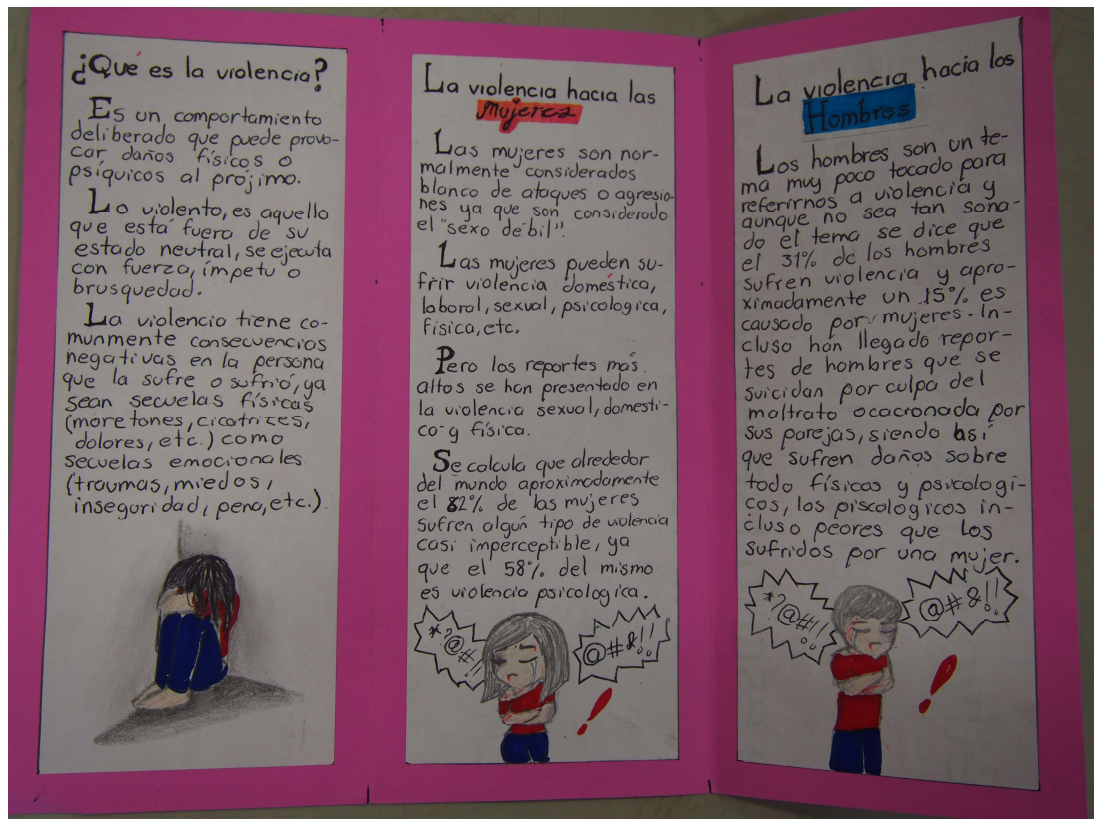


FIGURE 16: MIDDLE SCHOOL LEAFLETS ON GENDER VIOLENCE

Therefore, I hope to have shown that attention to both cosmology and affect is critical for understanding the discrepancies between Inmujeres’ and many Milpaltenses’ approaches to violence. While at first glance it may appear that the common Milpaltense notion of “orderly” violence constituted a justification of violence – “cultural violence” in the Inmujeres director’s terms (see previous chapter) – it is important to remember that many Milpaltenses disagreed about which concrete instances of violence counted as such. Similarly, in terms of the common order-chaos classification scheme I have outlined, the six types of violence defined by Inmujeres would fall into both orderly and disorderly categories, meaning that Inmujeres’ typology is an uneasy fit with common local concepts. This is evident in the case of physical violence, which may be an example of chaos-

oriented *abuso* or order-oriented *castigo*, depending on the specific case and its outcomes. Thus, rather than having inherent meaning, or constituting an altogether unknowable aporia (Bubandt 2014), violence often constituted a hauntingly uncertain event in this context, which begged interpretation but oft eluded verbalisation, such as when the motivations for a violent act remained oblique, perhaps even to the author of the act (cf. Das and Kleinman 2000). Including when it seemingly enacted cultural expectations, the meaning of violence may still be contested. Zucaritas had a point when he drew a connection between violence and love: Not only are they often found together, but they are both affective, embodied, powerful forces in the world, which are constantly being elaborated and interpreted in narratives and other forms of expression, and often follow cultural patterns, while always retaining their capacity to surprise, mystify, and dramatically transform those they work upon.

CONCLUSIONS

On the surface, much of what Inmujeres would have labelled as “violence against women” was indeed common in Milpa Alta. Yet while Inmujeres attempted to establish this as bad, ordinary Milpaltense narratives often appeared to complicate the moral significance of violence. Milpaltense attitudes towards actions that could have been described as “violence against women”, in their divergent forms, were a complex assemblage in motion: violence, like femininity, was often neither inherently good or bad, but had both creative and destructive potential. Violence may be premeditated or impulsive, instinctual or frenzied, instrumentalised or beyond control, forever escaping full exegesis.

Consistent with certain local cosmologies, many Milpaltenses did not speak of “violence”, but of “conflict” and “chaos”, and thus interpreted certain acts as maintaining or violating the social order. In so far as many recognised the creative or defensive potential of violations, acts were judged upon their outcomes. In general, both somatic (anger, shame, love) and social (conflict, (dis)respect) effects were taken very seriously. Therefore, whether an act was considered “violent”, and whether such violence was deemed acceptable, depended on the frame of reference as well as the concrete, affectively charged instance of its occurrence. There were instances in which individual Milpaltenses appeared to defend the use of violence, as defined by Inmujeres, but this was often

contested by other Milpaltenses. It is equally worth noting that Milpaltenses occasionally perceived a violation where Inmujeres did not, as in the case of being disrespectful.

The ethnographic material presented in this chapter shows that meaning-making surrounding violence often follows cosmological patterns, potentially giving rise to significantly different interpretations of the same act. As these divergent cosmologies drew from various influences, they cannot be subsumed into a single “Indigenous”, or Nahua, cosmology. This means that the Inmujeres director’s notion of “cultural violence” (see previous chapter) is misleading in multiple respects, as it implies that: a) there is only one, culturally-specific way Milpaltenses understand and justify violence; and b) Milpaltenses must shed this “cultural mind-set” in order to live peacefully. While certain violence-related concepts and symbols are widespread in Milpa Alta (e.g. the order-chaos dyad), people do not understand these in a singular way, and there are significant differences between discourse and practice. Moreover, Milpaltenses’ cosmologies offered divergent visions of how to live well together. From that perspective, anthropologists, feminist activists and other external observers’ own background-specific attitudes and behaviours are equally worthy of critical examination.

In sum, this chapter challenges some frequently taken-for-granted assumptions about violence in anthropology and beyond: 1) Violence is easily readable; 2) Violence is evil; and 3) Violence can be divided into legitimate and illegitimate forms. It also reframes the assertion that violence is gendered, by juxtaposing symbolic gender balance – the notion that men and women have equal potential for violence – with the symbolic gendering of particular kinds of violence, such as gossip as a feminine form of violence.

To rethink the conceptualisation of violence and how it is cosmologically linked to gender is not, however, to deny or trivialise the serious issue of structural inequalities, which left many women vulnerable to intimate violence in a way that their male partners were not, regardless of symbolic gender balance. From an analytical perspective, Milpaltenses’ claims about women and men’s equal potential for violence need to be weighed against political, economic, and legal structures that amplify men’s potential to harm women. Nonetheless, the Milpaltense discourse on violence need not be taken at face value to be significant. By drawing attention to the oft-overlooked role of cosmologies and affects in the conceptualisation of violence, I hope to pave the way for

more dynamic, locally meaningful engagements with women's everyday lives and struggles.

4. Warrior Women

I am not only a casualty, I am also a warrior.

Audre Lorde – “The Transformation of
Silence into Language and Action”

“Let’s talk about Santa Ana Tlacotenco,” the outspoken, short-haired, and robust Tlacotecan politician Carmen said. “For women to be heard, they have to have the guts to face, let’s say, this group of men who impose and they want the woman to be – the word is *submissive*, always obeying. Nowadays not anymore.”

This chapter will explore how many Milpaltense women constructed themselves as *mujeres fuertes* (strong women). I will specifically focus on a strong-woman sub-type: feminine subjectivities as *guerreras* (warrior women), which cast women as defenders of their families as well as sacrificing members of society by drawing on imagined pasts and present Milpaltense negotiations of identity. I argue that theories of power as vertical control eclipse horizontal creative and spiritual forms of power, which are more strongly associated with femininity than masculinity in Milpa Alta. Those latter theories of vertical power are valuable in that they highlight that women, on average, are far more vulnerable to intimate violence than their male partners, due to their widespread sociopolitical inferiority, as is also the case in Milpa Alta. Rather than focus on this well-trodden insight from gender violence studies (e.g. Merry 2009), I will instead turn my attention to alternative, horizontal forms of power, in order to illuminate what Milpaltenses mean when they speak of a power balance between men and women. To be clear, I am not implying that horizontal power is more important than vertical power, but that it does deserve attention in the context of Milpa Alta.

Expanding on my previous discussion of the ambiguity of feminine power, I will describe magic⁴⁵ as a means of creativity and control by which women may (not only) symbolically balance masculine forms of power and as well as their own emotions. These symbolic practices as well as women's historical and ongoing participation in the *Lucha Comunal* (Communal Struggle) help to explain why many Milpaltenses perceive men and women as equally powerful, in both positive and negative respects. Thus, I will look at how certain Milpaltense women re-orient and shape the narrative about gender inequality by styling themselves as warriors. However, practices of gendering and dividing spheres of power makes some positions of power, such as that of the politician, difficult for women to claim, as they often face considerable pushback from men and women alike.

I will begin by situating the notions of warriorhood and struggle in Milpa Alta and beyond, as well as highlighting the emerging study of female aggression in the social sciences. Then I will focus on a group of female shaman's apprentices in Villa Milpa Alta and how they learned to both heal and damage others, please men and control them through their gendered knowledge of, and relationship to, the cosmos. I will continue with the example of female Milpaltense politicians, and conclude with a discussion of contradictory notions of feminine power.

Beyond the female victim trope

When I discussed my key findings with Yolotl, she confirmed that “nobody feels like a victim, [women] feel strong and even proud of their role as guardians of the hearth (*guardianas del hogar*).” Though none of the Milpaltense women I spoke to described themselves as “victims,” or “survivors,” or any comparable label in the present tense, the trope of the female “victim-survivor” is commonplace in the literature on violence against women. In mainstream Anglophone feminist media, such as the online magazine *Everyday Feminism*, the term “survivor” has come to replace the term “victim” in cases of domestic abuse because “victim” denotes passivity and ruin, whereas “survivor” denotes

⁴⁵ I do not distinguish between “magic”, “witchcraft”, and “sorcery”, in the manner of Evans-Pritchard (1937), as Milpaltense shaman-*nahuales* are described variously as healers, masters of enchantment, and uncanny shape-shifters. As applied to ordinary Milpaltense women and certain men, such as twins, “magic” is often considered an inherent feminine attribute which may be distinguished from the “deep magic” employed by *nahuales* and healers as a learned craft.

inspirational action and endurance (Ferguson 2016). Acknowledging this trend, many anthropologists write of “victims” and “survivors” in the same breath (e.g. Das 2003; Sluka 2000; Olujic 1998). This slippage is not incidental: Describing someone as a “survivor” still risks defining them by their experiences of violence.

In addition, the female victim trope appears to obscure women’s potential for violence. For instance, Das suggests that “the use of women as perpetrators was a new development” in the sexualised torture of Iraqi prisoners by US-American and British soldiers, which “was shocking to many people and especially to feminists who had long argued that war was primarily an affair among men” (2008: 289-290). Note that this quote suggests a very narrow understanding of “feminism”, which hardly seems applicable to the Mexican context, where the image of the powerful Aztec mother earth-snake has titillated Latina feminist theorist’s imaginations for decades (e.g. Anzaldúa 1987; Estés 1992; Behar 1993). Moreover, the US poet, Audre Lorde’s, *Sister Outsider* (1984) in which she repeatedly describes herself as a “warrior” is a foundational work of intersectional feminist literature. Recently, “dangerous women” have become fashionable both among popstars like Ariana Grande and feminist scholars (see dangerouswomenproject.org). Evidently, different feminist authors conjure radically different images of femininity and its relationship to violence. Nonetheless, Das is correct in diagnosing a discomfort with the notion of women as perpetrators in mainstream Anglosphere anthropology, which has only recently begun to trouble gendered victim-victimizer dichotomies (e.g. Warren 2012) and study women’s participation in war and fighting, such as the “*she*-hadis” of the Islamic State (Bloom 2015), female guerrilla fighters in Eritrea (Bernal 2000), the “fearless woman” of Sri Lanka (Argenti-Pillen 2003), and female bullfighters (Pink 1997). There has long been a tendency to erase the agency of self-sacrificing women in colonial India and other Global South contexts: “it was imperialist to erase the image of the luminous fighting Mother [goddess] Durga and invest the proper noun Sati with no significance other than the ritual burning of the helpless widow as sacrificial offering who can then be saved” (Spivak 1988: 103). Similarly, efforts to combat “gender violence” in Africa have been far more preoccupied with the sensationalised image of female genital cutting than with supporting African women’s movements, and often find themselves at odds with these (Merry 2009: 146).

In Mexico, too, the stereotype of the subjugated Indigenous woman is pernicious (Hernández 1998; Bonfil and Martínez 2003). Muehlmann provided one of the few ethnographies which details Indigenous women's capacity for political leadership and violence, suggesting that, among Northern Mexican Cucapá people, "current views of gender highlighting the power of women may well have developed relatively recently as a form of boundary-marking against 'Mexican culture'" (2013: 133). Yet if we accept that "power manifests itself differently in different social contexts" (ibid.: 140), why is it so difficult to imagine Indigenous women as powerful agents in their own right? Studies of sexuality in Latin America typically describe that machismo, homophobia, and misogyny are blamed for gender inequality (Gutmann 2004: 3). This points to an underlying notion of "hegemonic masculinity", denoting increasingly globalised and naturalised politico-economic structures of male domination (Moore 1994: 63). The hegemony of "hegemonic masculinity" in mainstream feminist theory allows little space for the possibility of feminine resistance, making it difficult to imagine women as anything but victims (see High 2010: 754-755).

Thus, it appears that female perpetratorhood needs yet to be taken seriously as a line of inquiry, though it was treated as a common sense notion by most Milpaltenses. Among the few men I interviewed, though certainly not a formally representative sample, there was a strong tendency to denounce their partner's, or female relatives', violent conduct towards them, so as to critique the globalised feminist narrative of women as the universally oppressed sex. For example, the medical doctor Adrián claimed that men are the victims of domestic violence just as often as women are: "It's 50%! Women, too, hit men, yell at them and humiliate them." He claimed that machismo, rather than allowing men to dominate the relationship, only has the effect that men remain silent about the violence they suffer, and added: "Women from these parts are very aggressive." While women did not stress women's potential for violence to the same extent, they did tell me many stories about female perpetrators. Moreover, it is worth noting that the only direct interpersonal violence I witnessed first-hand during fieldwork was female-to-male aggression, as it appeared to be more socially acceptable for women to slap a brother, or harass a partner, in public than vice versa.

Overemphasising female perpetratorhood risks obscuring women's structural disadvantage vis-a-vis men, which elevates men's potential to harm women over women's

potential to harm men. Yet it would equally be inaccurate to view power in Milpa Alta as “the preserve of men and the scourge of women” (Mayblin 2011: 136). Many Milpaltenses acknowledged women’s capacity for violence while simultaneously denouncing violence against women. Should local notions of a power equivalence between men and women be described as purely symbolic and removed from reality? Following Mayblin, there is a risk that “a fetishization of contrast and difference lead us to overlook local categories of correspondence between the sexes” (ibid.; cf. Strathern 1988; Harris 1994).

Butler’s redefinition of *subjectification* provides a way of understanding the simultaneity of agency and submission, of perpetratorhood and victimhood, of feminine warriorhood and hegemonic masculinity. Following Foucault, she argues that the process through which one becomes a subject is not simply the free choice of rational autonomous individuals but is always shaped by surrounding and internalised structures of power: “power is not simply what we oppose but also, in a strong sense, what we depend on for our existence” (Butler 1997: 2). Hence, even in a context profoundly defined by machismo, womanhood is not simply defined in opposition to power: shaped by divergent conceptualisations of power, divergent feminine subjectivities are, in most cases, neither actively imposed on, nor chosen by, women, but instead internalised and rejected to varying degrees on an often subconscious level. In the following, I aim to provide more detailed insight into the kinds of power and violence associated with being a Milpaltense “warrior woman”, as well as their gendered limits.

WEAVING THE WARRIOR

Carmen was only one of many Milpaltense women I met throughout my research whose subjectivities evoked the local ideal of the *mujer fuerte*, the strong woman, who works hard, is wise, and virtuous. When I asked Milpaltense men and women to describe the typical qualities of a Milpaltense woman, the most commonly named items were: “hard-working” (*trabajadora*), “fighter” (*luchadora*), “tenacious” (*aguantadora*), “head of the family” (*jefa de familia*), “mother” (*madre*), “grandmother” (*abuela*), and “cook” (*cocinera*). Thus, there were many ways in which “strong womanhood” could express itself: for instance, when Conchita was given the choice by her mother-in-law, she chose to become a cook, rather than a shopkeeper, because of the power she believed cooking had to transform the

bodies and souls of those she fed. However, there were generational and class disagreements about what constitutes “strong womanhood.” The ladies from the church choir, older women from humble backgrounds, remembered a time before they had access to electricity, water, household machinery, or kindergartens, and criticised younger women, saying contemptuously: “*estas flojas* – these lazybones,” or “*estas buevonas* – these good-for-nothings,” suggesting these are not good workers and do not fulfil their obligations as women. For young women, “strong womanhood” might be more about studying hard in order to help their families “get ahead” (*sacarlas adelante*). While most women viewed tenacity as a desirable quality in a woman, younger women were less likely to agree that this also meant having to put up with a violent husband.

Confirming Adapon’s (2008) observations among Milpaltense *carnitas*-producing families, I observed many women work all day, every day, and often significantly more than their husbands. Yet it was rare to hear women complain of this, and particularly older women expressed “loving” their work. For example, Conchita reported that she refused to go on holiday with her late husband because she had no desire to interrupt her work as a cook: “I had too much love for my work.” Some women, both young and old, asserted that hard work strengthened their bodies, while repetitive work, such as sweeping, evened their emotions. Yolotl, who enthusiastically attended the back-strap-loom weaving class, said that weaving felt “zen-like” and relaxing to her, though she also mentioned that this was not the case for her mother: She had been forced to weave by her grandfather as a child and made her husband promise that she would never have to weave again. Weaving is a delightful hobby, but can be very painful for one’s back and knees when done for longer than just a couple of hours. While interpretations of the notion vary, becoming a *mujer fuerte* involves cultivating one’s mind, body, and image.

The notion of feminine warriorhood has been popularised by a Milpaltense *nabual*-shaman who endorsed a wealthy, conservative candidate in the 2015 municipal elections. Given the general unpopularity of politicians in Milpa Alta, who were often accused of abusing power to enrich themselves, or worse yet, of selling communal land, it is not unusual for them to seek the magical support and protection of *nabuales*. The *nabual*, his mostly female apprentices, and I accompanied campaign rallies, blew conch trumpets, ritually cleansed political associates, banged the *buehuatl* drum, and exclaimed, “*tenchicabuac!* – *¡fuerza guerrera!*” (warrior force/power), as we marched and danced up and

down the towns' hilly corners. "Warrior force!" became the party's slogan in Milpa Alta, and was soon ubiquitous, featured on banners and chanted collectively. The declared purpose of invoking "warrior force" was to harness cosmic energies to enthuse voters for the party. The *nabual* confidently declared that his candidate would win the election – and so he did.

"Warrior force" was a conveniently catchy, but imprecise translation, a "controlled equivocation" (Viveiros de Castro 2004: 5) on the *nabual's* part. In one of the talks he usually gave to his followers at his home on Saturdays, he explained that in the Nahuatl language, *tenchicahuac* refers to the strength (*chicabualiztli*) of stone (*tetl*) being pressed together like gritted teeth (*tentli*) to then be released, like a coiled serpent jumping upward. He demonstrated the motion by crouching down on the balls of his feet, fists tight, arms pressed against his chest in the mode of a weight lifter, biting his lower lip, tensing and drawing his body earthwards, as he said, to channel telluric energy. Then he released the combined energy of his body tension and the earth, jumping upwards, opening, straightening his body, arms, fingers, shooting into the air, bellowing "TENCHICAHUAC!" Now he instructed the group to imitate him, and we collectively exclaimed and embodied, indeed, became "*tenchicahuac*." Despite my sceptical disposition, I found it impossible not to feel momentarily uplifted and empowered by this psychosomatic speech act.

When women spoke of themselves as "warriors", they also drew on combinations of New-Age influenced images of Aztec warrior women and bellicose goddesses, the feminine serpent symbolism described in the previous chapter, warrior women of the Old Testament, Deborah, Judith and Yael, the famed 16th-century Nahuatl-speaking nun and poet, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (an erudite poet and "warrior" of the Catholic faith, see Cañizares-Esguerra 2016), female combatants in the Mexican Revolution of 1910, female *guerrilleras* of the Red Army in the 1970s, and female Zapatista fighters fighting for Indigenous women's rights in Chiapas today. Among younger Milpaltense women, empowered Western feminist archetypes, such as the models provided by Inmujeres, may also have influenced their understanding of warriorhood. Such a multiplicity of meanings evokes Turner's (1967: 50-51) usage of *polysemy*, according to which a dominant symbol – feminine warriorhood – may stand for various entities and actions, and different meanings may come into play at different times. My interlocutors did not seem to draw distinctions

between these different types of warrior women, instead melding them into a single fuzzy concept, which resonates with similar feminine ideologies in other parts of Latin America. For example, Catholic *sofredoras* (women who have suffered greatly) in Northern Brazil are more likely than men to actively cast themselves as defenders of their families and sacrificing members of society to offset the sin that surrounds them (Mayblin 2010: 67-93).

Yet the emphasis on women as defenders (*defensoras*) may be a recent phenomenon: “in Latin American history, men and masculinity are tied to the defence of the nation and the protection of family, home and the people, while women are cast not as defenders but as reproducers of the nation as wives and mothers” (Radcliffe and Westwood 1993: 12). The advent of *defensoras* may reflect changes in Indigenous identity politics vis-à-vis the multiculturalist state (Muehlmann 2013: 133), and, as one commentator suggested for the Peruvian context, it may also be symptomatic of rural women’s embodied knowledge of the stakes and violences involved in the “capitalist extractivist model of development, imposed on the Global South over the past 20 years”, as rural women are disproportionately affected by its effects (Silva Santisteban 2017: 9). Several of my Milpaltense friends expressed that defending the environment and their Milpaltense identity were interlinked concerns (see also Chapter 1), and that women were better organisers than men in general, as they kept a better overview of their social networks.

In her essay about fighting cancer and living with disability, *Soy guerrera* (I am a warrior) published in the aforementioned anthology of Milpaltense women’s stories, *Gritos y susurros*, the 23-year-old Anaid Arista summarises the spirit of warrior womanhood: “I am ready to make progress, nothing and nobody can stop me because ‘I am a warrior’, I know I have won many battles, I know also that many more remain ahead” (2008: 114, my translation). When Milpaltense women identify as “strong women,” “strugglers,” and “warriors,” they are highlighting that they are not defined by whether or not they have personally experienced direct forms of violence, but that they are prepared to meet whatever challenge they might have to face, both as individuals and collectively. In other words, they draw attention to communal, rather than self-centred concerns, and develop a vigilant, proactive, but not a reactive, stance, in contrast to more passive models of mainstream Christian femininity (Melhuus 1992). To be a *guerrera* was

commonly viewed to be incompatible with being a victim, which was a pejorative notion because of its association with the negative value of *protagonismo*. Yet as *guerreras* were recognised as being powerful, the notion was not only positive, but also conveyed the potential to do harm – something I will return to in my discussion of feminine magic and gossip. Before that, I will provide some historical background on the feminisation of “warriorhood” in Milpa Alta.

Aztequitas



FIGURE 17: AZTEQUITAS DANCERS PERFORMING AT THE FEAST OF ST. ANNE

At the feast of St. Anne and the New Year’s celebrations half a year later, girls perform warriorhood in Catholic conversion dance-theatre as *aztequitas* (little/revered Aztecs, see fig. 17), while boys perform as *santiagueros*, “St. Jacobites” (see fig. 18). This sexual division is recent: the *aztequitas* used to be performed by both sexes in the grandparents’ generation, but at the time of my research, it was usually young, symbolically virgin, girls

who danced the *aztequitas*, lined up in order of declining height. Like the *santiagueros*, they practiced for about six hours on the ten Saturdays before the patron saint's day. Their elaborate, colourful costumes, usually lovingly crafted by their mothers, featured a feathered headband, sequined velvet capes and skirts with Christian imagery, white embroidered blouses, sandals, and a wooden baton. While there were similar dance groups in other pueblos, the two *aztequitas* groups of Tlacotenco sang some texts in Nahuatl, which were memorised without the dancers actually being able to speak their grandparents' language. Several of the songs were hymns to the Lady St. Anne. In their entirety, the songs tell the story of the conversion of the Aztecs to Christianity, portrayed as a joyous event, in which the Aztecs saw the glory of the Virgin of Guadalupe and were converted by their immediate devotion to her.

In both the *aztequitas* and the *santiagueros* dances, the grim realities of the historical conversion were reduced to what appears like a curiously cheerful caricature. As the girls were portraying Aztec warriors, their batons clashed in several dance-fights with a designated partner, but the fight was entirely symbolic, with no risk of injury – unlike the all-male *santiaguero* dance, where real machetes were swirling and clashing forcefully. I asked my young friend Esteban whether the boys were not afraid of getting hurt and he shrugged: “Someone does get injured from time to time.” This risk was deemed acceptable, and was greater yet for the young men in charge of the fireworks display: For instance, a *cobuetero* (firework-firer) of the 2015 pilgrimage to Chalma was killed when a rocket accidentally exploded on him. To be male is not, as such, obligatory for *cobueteros*, but customary: There were no female *cobueteros* at the time of my research. As is the case for bullfighting, most high-risk recreational activities are typically the purview of young men, though this was beginning to change.

But girls, too, were exposed to a kind of risk – to their reputation. While dancing in honour of St. Anne is usually viewed as a fun act of devotion today, dancing used to be much more controversial amongst pious Catholics, the middle-aged Church choir members, Estrella and Ana, recalled: They would have liked to have been *aztequitas* dancers when they were young, but their mothers did not allow them to, because they believed it to be immoral for a girl to dance. “Something that whores do”, Ana elaborated. According to Enrique, the *aztequitas* used to be accompanied by a couple of young men, the *pixiqueros* who would protect them from men in the audience reaching out to touch

them by blowing into a rooster's or turkey's *buche* (wattle), thereby inflating it and producing a kind of a balloon. So there used to be a lewd, playful aspect to the dance that seems to have vanished now.

As Ana, Estrella, and Enrique's statements illustrate, the dances enjoyed the prestigious status of a "cultural tradition", regardless of their colonial connotation. As one *aztequitas* dancer commented, the dancers represent the community as well as Aztec warriors. Illuminating this point, the former dancer Peña Meza from the Milpaltense pueblo of Tecómitl asserted that "the *aztequitas* dance represents the warrior cult [of the Aztecs ... including] the refusal to adore the [warrior] God Huitzilopochtli" (2015: 66, my translation). Therefore, *aztequitas* dances are at once performances of Catholic devotion, Aztec pride, and Milpaltense warriorhood. Yet because almost all current dancers were female, the image of the warrior community they represent has become feminised, even though Milpaltenses themselves do not usually mention this in their descriptions of the dance.



FIGURE 18: SANTIAGUEROS DANCERS AT THE FEAST OF ST. ANNE

Comuneras

Much as Aztec women were represented as having fought alongside men in the *aztequitas* dance, Milpaltenses often mentioned the importance of women's contributions in historical battles to me. They also commonly represented the Spanish Invasion, the Revolution, and more recent fights as specific events within one larger, continuous struggle: the *Lucha Comunal* (Communal Fight), an ongoing fight to protect their territory from invaders since the Spanish Invasion 500 years ago, as Gomezccésar details in his 2005 thesis on Milpaltense historical consciousness.⁴⁶ For instance, Jenny told me, "As a woman and *milpaltense* I think it is essential to defend our forests [...] it is our responsibility as *comuneros* (community members) to do so."

Manuel Garcés Jiménez, the chief historian of the Council of the Milpaltense Chronicles (COCROMA), dedicated his book on *zapatismo* in Milpa Alta to "[a]ll *campesinos* (peasants), above all the women, who with the children slung onto their shoulder with their shawls, fought for the land and the pursuit of democracy, liberty, justice and respect of human rights" (2014: 3, my translation). The image of the woman who fights with a gun in her hand and a baby on her back is certainly an idealised one, but it gives a sense of the frequently-expressed recognition that Milpaltense women enjoy with respect to their involvement in the Revolution. Among the female revolutionaries mentioned were, for instance, Generala Soraya, of Villa Milpa Alta, and Sandra Reyna Arguella "*La Colorada*", of San Lorenzo Tlacoyucan. Both were exalted as examples of traditional virtue and praised for their ability to control men, be it through the feminine art of sex, or masculine military prowess, their skill at traditional women's crafts, such as weaving, or cooking, their humility, and their positive evaluation by the ultimate Nahuatl-speaking male authority figure, Zapata. While women were honoured for their important role as revolutionaries, Milpaltenses often portrayed their contribution in a gendered form, highlighting what were regarded to be typically feminine qualities of cunning, as well as skill in seduction and cooking, allowing women to take control over the male enemy in ways that men could not.

Women were also described as having leveraged their authority as teachers and mothers to successfully stand up to male enemies. In a case mentioned by the elderly

⁴⁶ Note that similar discourses of *lucha* or *luta* exist throughout Latin America. For instance, see Moro Martins (2017) for the Brazilian case, or Holbraad (2014) for the Cuban example.

communal leader of San Pablo when I visited the historical Zapatista headquarters there, a woman saved the lives of many men. The 16th October 1916 was the day of the infamous Chapitel Massacre, in which Carranza's army was ordered to kill all Zapatista men of Villa Milpa Alta. All those they were able to round up were shot by the side of the Church of the Virgin of the Ascension. The men of San Pablo had a similar fate in store for them, but the chief Carranza supporter of the pueblo was a teacher. So a female colleague of his confronted him: "Don't do this! Because if you do it, you and I are going to have a problem." Remarkably, the story goes that this intervention was enough to secure free passage to the captured men. To support the veracity of his tale, he told me about a woman who fearlessly stood up to a Zapatista chief when he found her working in the fields, accompanied by her children. The chief wolf-whistled at her daughter, "probably in a disrespectful manner and the lady didn't like it. And she tells him, 'Look, bullets were also made for coronels.' And she seized her weapon."

Some other Milpaltense accounts of the Revolution support the claim that women had an active, even heroic, role in the war, but emphasise their masculinity, rather than their femininity. Pineda titled a photograph of a sombreroed woman in white, bearing a rifle, bullet belts crossed over her chest, and a determined expression, "A manly revolutionary from Morelos who shared the campaign's sufferings with the Zapatistas" (2012: 192, my translation). At the time, he suggests, this would have been a rather exotic sight, but it is clear that women were not discouraged and often praised for joining the war effort. Many joined as *soldaderas*, who were fighters, caterers, and companions to the soldiers.

However, many Milpaltense women experienced the trauma of war as civilians, rather than fighters. The celebrated Nahuatl-speaker, artist's model, and narrator of the Revolution, Luz Jiménez, wrote, "It was common to steal damsels ... they disappeared on the mountain" (cit. in Pineda 2012: 176, my translation). To prevent the rape of their women, Milpaltenses employed some of the same strategies they had employed during the Spanish Invasion, centuries earlier⁴⁷. Men and women in Santa Ana Tlacotenco and San Pablo Oztotepec told me that camouflaged women were hidden in caves, but also at

⁴⁷ In a recent paper, "*No dejes que te anden abusando*" (IV. ALA Conference of the Latin American Anthropological Association, Mexico City, 09 October 2015), Dominique Raby described similar correspondences between the oral histories of the Revolution among the Nahuatl-speaking people of Alto Balsas, Guerrero and Book XII of the *Florentine Codex*, chapter 40.

the bottom of big granaries and whatever else might serve as a hiding place. According to the communal leader of San Pablo, “Many times, they took their children with them, carrying them, and the children cried. Lest they expose them with their cries, they asphyxiated them.” In the exceptional circumstances of the war, he says that many mothers sacrificed their sons by sending them into the fight: “Arm yourselves, don’t stay here like you’re useless!” Women were not expected to carry the burden of *defenderse* alone, so some demanded sacrifices from their sons.

On 5th February 1975, the *comuneros* of Tlacotenco, virtually all the adults in town rose up to defend their land, armed with machetes, bats, and guns. The political representative of Milpa Alta, Daniel Chicharo, had made a deal with the paper factory Peña y Pobre which gave them access to a large part of the forest, something the populace greatly opposed. They seized the building materials and told the architect and builders to go home. In response, the government sent dozens of infantrymen to quash the uprising. Amparo, the leader of the *tlacuateras*, remembers that in this tense situation, a woman, Margarita Monterola, rang the church bells to summon more people to the forest: “*se juntaron puras mujeres que los hombres habían ido al monte*” (only women came together, as the men had gone to the mountain [already]), a witness is quoted in a memorial issue of the gazette *La Voz... de Milpa Alta* 35 years later. Seeing thousands of furious people marching to the mountain on foot, by horse, and by car, the government forces retreated. Finally, the conflict was resolved by presidential decree in favour of the people. Chicharo, however, was lynched once the truth about his involvement came out (Gomezcésar 2005: 168). His example serves as a reminder to all politicians after him to not abuse their power, lest they suffer the consequences.

While men, such as Achilles Vargas, were generally recognised as the leaders of the Movement in Defence of the Land, women’s involvement in the *Lucha Comunal* was also highlighted, and nine women were recognized for their specific contributions in the gazette. Carmen said that women’s impact on historical events such as this one must not be forgotten and, in the light of this legacy, there should be self-defence classes for women in Milpa Alta, “*para que las mujeres aprendan a defendernos*” (so that we women learn to defend ourselves) with respect to today’s challenges. In more recent decades, “the mechanics of oppression are becoming more sophisticated”, a former female guerrillas of the Red Army gloomily spoke at an Inmujeres event in Villa Milpa Alta. She considered trust in the state,

as represented by politicians, police, and judges, as having been undermined by widespread corruption and collusion with criminal organizations, leaving citizens few avenues to articulate dissent and to defend their rights. I will now turn to a different kind of self-defence: magical seduction.

GUERRERAS

Soledad, a short, youthful 40-year-old, was swinging in a colourful hammock in the shaman's blooming garden, her face glowing from the heat of the day, light breaking through the foliage and dancing on her skin. Juan was dressed in his customary black, leaning against the tree pensively and speaking softly. He cautioned, "*lo peligroso es fanatizarse*" (the danger is to become a fanatic), and emphasised how we can learn from different religions. "Everyone of us has a different concept of what God is. For our ancestors, He was Tloque Nahuaque [Lord of the Near and the Nigh. ...] He was everywhere. This is the other side of our battle: Who is God?" The Catholic invaders were fanatics, and therefore imposed a "European God from faraway lands". That is when violence against women began in Milpa Alta, he said.

Contrary to the exoticised image of magic, the mundane and the mystical are often intertwined (Jöhncke and Steffen 2015: 9-35). In pop culture, shamans, or *nabuales*, as they are called in Central Mexico, are often depicted as sage repositories of obscure, ancient wisdom, rather than live human beings with an interest in politics, current trends, and foreign philosophies. At the same time, in the pueblos, they are also perceived as nefarious figures, rumoured to be shape-shifters, thieves, seducers, and murderers. The *nabual* said he lost his father as a little boy and, confronted with his mother's grief and financial difficulties, asked a *nabual* to accept him as an apprentice. This happened in 1935, he claimed, which would have made him considerably older than he looked and acted. Based on his in any case long experience, the *nabual* imparted "Nahuatl culture" classes, which were comprised of four types of lessons: language, dance, herbal medicine (*herbolaria*), and philosophy. He described this body of knowledge as encompassing celestial mathematics, cosmic geometry, herbal medicine, and *flor y canto* ("flower and song", i.e. poetry), and often spoke for hours on end, discussing the meanings of dreams, reading natural omens,

identifying medicinal plants, describing the hidden meanings of Nahuatl words, discussing past experiences together, feelings, and legends.

He called his four female apprentices the “*guerreras*” (warrior women), and his male apprentice, Juan, is jokingly called “*la quinta guerrera*” (the fifth warrior woman). In Nahuatl, they translate *guerrera* as *tepopobque* (healer), implying that warfare and “healing magic” are the same. What is often described as “healing magic” of the *curandero* (healer) is not necessarily meant to cure anyone, as it may be employed to harm somebody to restore justice. It is also not simply about obscure superstitions, as the word “magic” might imply, but involves plant poisons and other means of intoxication. This equivalence is not particular to Milpa Alta, but has also been described for other parts of the Nahuatl-speaking world⁴⁸.

A large part of the apprentice *nabuales*’ training consisted in expanding their imagination, which was seen as key to recognising all the connections between the things of the universe. In other words, as long as something was made up within the logic of the philosophy he was teaching, it was valid. Juan claimed that the *nabual* was one of the teachers of Carlos Castañeda, who subscribed to the same philosophical stance in writing his ethnographic fiction, and also wrote about “*guerreras*”. The tools used for this creative part of the training were mainly a specific questioning style, generating curiosity, and drugs, such as peyote.

The *guerreras* (warrior women) often seemed unusually independent and empowered, but, like most Milpaltense women, did not view themselves as “feminists”, which they construed as hating men. Instead, they described themselves as followers of a pristine femininity and sexuality, as it existed before the Spanish Inquisition. Some traditionally-minded Milpaltenses may perceive them as dangerous witches, Cassandra, one of the *guerreras* conceded, laughing, “If someone gives us trouble, we can hex them.” Warrior women magically control their fate and defend themselves from men through the art of sex, the threat of herbal magic, and other predatory incantations. Ways of manipulating women were not discussed, as women were rarely in political power positions – they could, however, be hexed.

⁴⁸ “What did it mean if the witch was also a healer? [... W]itches were still curing the ills of the earth [...] by murder” (Knab 1995: 15).

According to the *nabual*, feminine magic involved knowledge of “the libido, the soft, the sensual, and the erotic”, but Spanish clergy condemned Indigenous expressions of sexuality in which women were more empowered. Learning the art of sex was thus a key aspect of the *guerreras*’ apprenticeship. Having chosen not to become an apprentice myself, I only had access to learning the basics of this art, which was accessible to both men and women. The *guerreras*, on the other hand, were taught the “*cinco misterios de la mujer*” (five mysteries of the woman) by higher-level female shamans, with no men present. The *nabual* said the ancient Mexicas learned their sexual knowledge in the *telpochcalli* (house of instruction for the young): “*timomachilia in motzotzobua*” (you learn sexuality) to achieve a “deep sexuality”. By this, he meant a Nahua-specific understanding of sexuality and translated the Nahuatl word he employed for it, *motzotzobua*⁴⁹, as “the harmonious movement of the couple: bodily, mentally, emotionally, spiritually.” These different dimensions of sexuality had to be present at the same time for “deep sexuality” to ensue.

The *nabual* had written an eco-sex-treatise for his followers, which referenced some of the basics of sexual magic. The text on sex follows instructions on healthy eating, reads like a practical manual, not unlike, and probably to an extent inspired by, the *Kamasutra*. For example, it contains detailed drawings illustrating the movements to be made and mapping the erogenous zones of the men’s and women’s bodies. Healthy eating and satisfying sex are then linked to humans’ role within the cosmos: Milpaltense couples come to embody the Sun (male) and the Moon (female). The *nabual* warned that couples who only seek their own gratification antagonise their celestial counterparts. The Sun and the Moon will intervene against humanity’s current behaviour, which, he asserted, promotes unhappiness, via global warming: “the Sun will send more energy so that humans will become conscious.” True happiness, the *nabual* wrote, in an implicit critique of neoliberal values, does not require harming the environment, but protecting it, and is found in healthy eating, sexual satisfaction, and getting proper rest. Sexual satisfaction is achieved by knowing one’s bodily reactions and being attentive to each other’s needs.

⁴⁹ The exact etymology of *motzotzohua* is unclear – the closest correspondence I could find in the online Nahuatl dictionary of the Wired Humanities Project Mesoamerica (<http://whp.uoregon.edu/dictionaries/nahuatl/>) is *(mo)zohzōhua*, “to spread open one’s arms; to spread something out; to extend flat things on a surface”.



FIGURE 19: *GUERRERAS* AND FOLLOWERS HIKING WITH THE *NAHUAL*

A woman's smile

Beyond the unisex basics of sexual magic, the shaman explained that feminine magic allows a woman to use her sexual charms to manipulate men's actions. This was considered particularly valuable when a woman has to defend herself. Given the strong conceptual link between violence and emotion, such as *coraje* (anger), the *guerreras* recurred to the language of emotions when they asked the *nabual* for advice on how to react to sexual harassment.

One Saturday afternoon in May, when we had assembled for the *nabual's* weekend lecture in his airy, makeshift wood-framed and PVC-panelled hut, welcoming the sunlight in, Soledad politely inquired whether she might speak about something she had on her

mind. The *nabual* assented, and so she began: “Yes, it’s certain about *hacer de tripas corazón*, one should lay one’s feelings to the side...” Then she explained that a man had been behaving strangely towards her, and “he passes by and hugs me, and he puts those hands of his on my back [...] which is to say, this made me feel really uncomfortable. [...] Because for me it really was very irritating.” The *nabual* answered, “I understand perfectly.”

Then Elena, an earthy, maternal figure in her fifties, joined the conversation, to support Soledad’s claims: “And the girl who [...] gave us our certificates, he went to her and he said, ‘Hey [...] how pretty’, or I don’t know what he said to her, and then he hugs her and gives her a kiss.” Cassandra, a striking, tall, light-skinned woman in her late 30s, interjected, “on the side,” and added, “In the past, for example, I was quite rude or quite insolent when they did that to me. I said, ‘Listen!’, I would even be very rude to these people. Not anymore.” The others laughed.

Now Elena supported Cassandra’s account, remembering one time when Cassandra remained impassive after a stranger kissed her: “What patience of Sandy!” Citlalcoatl, the *nabual*’s flamboyant, spikey-haired and glitter-eye-shaded partner, remarked, “It’s that there are some who are very daring.” The other women agreed. Soledad reiterated, “Well, for me, it was, like, uncomfortable.” Elena said, “Yes, very uncomfortable, yes.” Citlalcoatl agreed, “they grab you by the waist [...] asking to get past you, because sometimes it’s their excuse. [...] There, what can you do in that moment? What reaction can you have?” The others laughed, and the *nabual* answered, “Here it comes.”

The *nabual* launched into his lecture, first drawing on the whiteboard, asking us, “What’s this? Yes, the face, yes? The eyes, right? But it’s the new moon, the waxing moon, the full moon, and the waning moon.” He pointed at the forehead, ears and chin of the circular face on the board, which he assigned to the four lunar phases, and continued drawing. “Or rather, all this [...] is related, here it comes, the face [...] There are different types of lips. There are types which invite you to kiss them. Yes or no? Yes, there are lips like that – both among men and among women.” He continued drawing lines over the moon-face on the whiteboard. “Nature is so wise that she placed all these lines like a shield. What is the purpose of a shield?”

Elena said, “To protect. *Chimalli*,” and Citlalcoatl added, “To reject whoever passes in front.” The *nabual* responded, “Exactly.” He went on covering the face circle with a grid of lines. “Always in the history of mankind there has been more feminine power (*fuereza femenina*) because feminine power is [...] infinite. A man’s power is limited up to a certain point. Yes? [...] These lines that we have in our faces [...] they are more sensitive in women than in men. [...] What is a woman’s best curve?” The group answered in unison, “The smile,” and the *nabual* confirmed, “to smile, not to laugh.”

Soledad pondered this. “This was the point where I think I made my mistake. No? At first we got along well, and I smiled and everything, and then he said something that made me laugh. And this is where I saw that he probably thought, ‘she’s easy.’” The *nabual* replied, “So you have to know *how* to smile.” He asked his followers to count how many points on the facial grid a smile comprises, and they counted seven. He confirmed, “They are seven. And this is where the seven energetic points come. Yes? You need to [...] activate a point of defence. The powerful, loving power. So, you need to show yourself loving, but forceful. Yes? Powerful. Then the generative power. You can generate authority over others.”

Cassandra recalled, “One time [...] a guy comes over, and says, ‘Can you tell me the time?’ [...] but he grabs my hand, so, it wasn’t about knowing the time. And I turn towards him, as if to tell him, ‘Go away, don’t touch me!’ And he left me alone and went. But I didn’t have to say anything.” The *nabual* commented, “You generated an attitude. And then comes the magic power in knowing how to inhale. [...] Then the fantastic power: a commanding voice.” At this, Cassandra joked, “Like to the dog,” and Elena exclaimed, “Sit!”

The *nabual* acknowledged the interruption in a kindly tone, “Sure. [...] And then comes the harmonious power. So, how do I get out of this darkness? [...] With patience, prudence, perseverance, and constancy. Yes, and these are the points we will see. [...] T]hen comes the infinite power. Yes? The infinite power: now you have to turn the coccyx upside down. So, you make a handstand in order to generate a ...?”

Elena suggested, “Well, an energy,” and the *nabual* corrected her, “Nourishment with hydrogen, nitrogen, oxygen, and carbon in the neurons. Yes? To activate certain points, of which we have 2,000. So that, little by little, women will retake the place they

had thousands of years ago ...” At this, he vaguely referenced the women of ancient matriarchies, such as the Amazons of ancient Greek myth and the women of Zion, implying that women all over the world will someday restore these matriarchal systems and reclaim the power held by men in the present.

After having described the seven energetic points of the shield-smile, their purpose, and how they are activated, Citlalcoatl protested, “But you still haven’t told us, like [...] when someone goes past you and does this to you” and Cassandra completed, “what to do.” The *nabual* took a breath, “Let’s see. This we have to activate.” He then explained that it was a higher-level female shaman who had brought to his attention that “we need to study all these points and all these lines. [...] You need to know how to read the face. [...] When we talk of the *nabual*, the *nabual* is a good actor. So, if you are *nabuales*, you will have to be good actors.” Citlalcoatl inquired, “So, Sandy’s a good actress?” “Well, she has already begun to act,” the *nabual* conceded. “*Moxayacatzin motequiti* – you have to work your face”, he said, because facial lines extend into the infinite, thus accessing cosmic energies.

He then gave a historical example to demonstrate the power of feminine charm: When the first woman became the municipal leader of Milpa Alta in 1947, “the whole pueblo was in uproar: How could a woman govern us? But Aurora Fernández did not complain, she resorted to her charms and had to come personally.” So she informed herself about the necessities of the people and ordered the construction of a highway to Santa Ana Tlacotenco, so that soon “everyone loved her [...] she fulfilled her promise.” However, it had been the Senator Fernando Casas Alemán who had taken the responsibility on himself to finance the building works which had allowed Fernández to win Milpaltenses’ respect. The *nabual* explained her success in convincing the senator with women’s inherent capacity to subjugate men through seduction. It is precisely because of their fear of seduction that men try to repress women, while women, in reality, are merely seeking a balance between genders, he said.

To summarise, the *nabual*’s discourse reframed the *guerreras*’ question about sexual harassment and instead discussed how they might prevent finding themselves in that position to begin with. Worded differently, he sought to teach them how to develop a *guerrera* subjectivity: to become the kind of woman who is not victimised but instead controls men’s actions by harnessing seven cosmic energies (power, love, creativity,

magic, fantasy, harmony, and infinity) to generate “infinite feminine power,” which he described as superior to men’s power.

Toloache

Though the *guerrereras*’ training was aimed at acquiring greater power than average women have by accessing a partially occult system of knowledge, this knowledge and associated abilities were not categorically different than those of ordinary women. As mentioned in the previous chapter, all women, particularly mothers, were viewed to be endowed with ambiguous, potentially creative and destructive powers. For example, if benevolent magic, such as sexual seduction, has failed its purpose against an unrepentantly violent husband, a woman may opt to use *toloache* (*datura innoxia* Miller), a herb widely known in Mexico as a proverbial love drug. For example, Conchita told me about a woman who was known as “Ana *la bruja*” (Ana the witch) for having married “*a la Malagueña, a la mala*” (through black magic) by putting *toloache* in a man’s drink. She explained, “Here we believe that if you want, say you like someone, you bewitch him.”

Angel’s trumpet, as we know it, has pretty, funnel-like white and pink flowers and may therefore be found decorating British gardens, too. However, its leaves are used for a wide array of medicinal purposes: for instance, on the skin to soothe pains or consumed orally to battle infections, as Conchita’s friend Lizbeth mentioned. She likened the plant’s qualities to those of marijuana, or its local equivalent, *amapola*. Yet in terms of an actual remedy for problems in love, *toloache* was not terribly common, as the associated health risks are high. According to some women, it makes an aggressive man easier to handle, but dosed in excess, it effectively lobotomizes him. This is confirmed by the ethnobotanist Zaragoza Campos (2009),

To enamor and/or dominate the beloved, some dishonest women use [*toloache*] to attract the beloved who does not love back, as well as jealous women who employ it to maintain absolute dominion over their partner, despite this use being a criminal offense, as the intoxication it produces makes men lose their free will, to the point of turning them into ‘zombies’ with irreversible damage to their central nervous system (own translation).

The drug's potency is signaled in the plant's original Nahuatl name, *toloatzin* (bowed head), which features the reverential suffix *-tzin*. To demonstrate its power, Conchita narrated the story of a man she knew who was given *toloache* by his wife:

“[He was] a shorty of 1.50, 1.45 [metres height]”, she grinned, then turned serious. “He hit her ... But, they say, *el valiente vive hasta que el cobarde quiere* (literally, “the brave one lives as long as the coward wishes”, meaning that a seemingly weak individual has the responsibility to confront their bully and end the bullying) ... She was giving him his dose. But they say this herb-”

Her friend, Lizbeth, interjected, “So, it wasn't just once, a little, but a number of times?” Conchita confirmed, “Yes, many times. So, well, he was, like, hunching, hunched, and imagine that he was like an old donkey, saying, ‘yes, yes mi *señora*, all that you wish’...” Lizbeth gasped, as Conchita continued, “They say that his mind had already gone (*su cabeza ya le patinaba*), but it wasn't gone, rather, it ended up like – like an imbecile, no?”

Conchita visibly took pleasure in telling this story, enacting the moves of the characters and modulating her voice. She was generally comfortable with taking on leadership roles and speaking publicly, and was also self-assured in dealing with men, insisting that “*nunca me dejé*” (I always stood up for myself). For instance, she related to me how she once refused an admirer's rose unless he bought one for all of her friends, too. She also never married in church, but lived in free union with her husband instead, telling him: “If you want our love to have delicacy, love, devotion, and great affection, we need to give it an aspect of adventure and not obligation for the two. That way, neither you nor I will get bored, and with time, we will become sweethearts, spouses, and lovers at once. Let's make a sweet adventure of our love.” She insisted that machismo is only a problem for women who are financially dependent from their husbands, so she has worked hard as a cook her entire life. When her marriage eventually went sour, she told her husband to get lost, so he moved to a different house. She did not need him. In the spirit of a true *guerrera*, she “dressed up” as a *tepopobqui* (healer) on the Day of the Dead and carried out *limpias* (purifying healing rites) in Nahuatl. Given her somewhat unconventional and independent lifestyle, as well as her love for salacious stories, her tone betrayed no moral judgment in telling the story.

Lizbeth, on the other hand, was indignant. She was a self-confident, sporty, retired teacher, and expert on medicinal herbs thanks to her mother, who was a traditional midwife and unusually emancipated for her time. Lizbeth declared, “[The woman] should have been braver, in the sense that she should have stood up for herself (*no se hubiera dejado*) from the start. But this drugging him, well, from that point she did wrong.” As mentioned in the previous chapter, *dejarse* is the opposite of *defenderse* and being a strong woman, and therefore morally reprehensible (cf. Raby 2012). *Dejarse* is taking the easy way, being lazy and cowardly, whereas *defenderse* requires effort and courage. To use herbal remedies against one’s husband’s aggression is the defence of weak, desperate, and evil women. Though notorious, *toloache* was rarely used.

Yet men may also employ magical curses, and women are not limited to symbolically feminine forms of violence, as the illness of *mal ojo*, the Evil Eye, suggests. A young male insisted, half-jokingly, half in earnest, that his sister casts the Evil Eye, whereas he cures it, and named some individuals in their family whom she allegedly attacked. Casting the Evil Eye is not in itself a feminine variant of violence, but is a power frequently associated with dangerous levels of “heat”, which is often linked to masculinity and old age.⁵⁰

Fuerza femenina

In sum, the *nabual*, Cassandra, and Conchita maintained that women have the power, and thus also a responsibility, to prevent unwelcome male advances and aggression. Is this an ideology intended to mask systemic inequality – indeed a form of victim-blaming? Arguably, when the *nabual* taught the *guerreras* to smile in response to sexual harassment, he was not telling them to passively endure sexism, which he acknowledged as a real concern: he was giving them a way of actively responding which was coherent with the

⁵⁰ This Evil Eye discourse appears related to the Aztec-Nahua cosmogonic heat-cold complex, which has been discussed at length elsewhere (López Austin 2012: 285-318). Broadly speaking, younger, female, and European individuals were often associated with the cold and wet, whereas Indigenous Mexicans, males, and elders were often associated with heat and dryness. According to this scheme, babies are thought to be particularly vulnerable to the cold, and most Milpaltense parents today are careful to keep their baby wrapped in a blanket, regardless of the outside temperature. Moreover, a collectivity can generate “heat” through excessive ritual, better to communicate with the celestial sphere. In Aztec times, the heat-cold complex did not map onto a hierarchy, as heat and cold need to be balanced and held in creative tension.

philosophy behind his teachings and fostered an up-beat, reconciliatory fighting spirit, both towards themselves and their situation. In doing so, he effectively promoted both victim-blaming and feminine empowerment simultaneously, and I have no reason to suspect malicious intent on his part. Viewed in the wider context of local identity politics, the discourse about feminine magic and strength followed a common strategy: firstly, it drew legitimacy from an imagined past and collective identity; secondly, it promoted a “strong” self-image as warriors, as opposed to the “weak” self of a victim; and thirdly, it attributed agency to Milpaltenses, allowing them to take control over violent experiences. I would like to suggest that this warrior discourse primarily served the aim of focusing collective energies on the communal struggle, which was often described as being one with women’s struggles. The logic behind this discursive singularity of struggle was complex and was partly based on Milpaltense women’s leadership in forest protection matters and on the common symbolic association between Mother Earth and human mothers (see also Chapters 1 and 3). In any case, as gendered inequalities were often acknowledged by the *nabual* and other male leadership figures, it did not appear that they were seeking to mask these – yet their warrior discourse may also have had that (unintended) effect in certain instances. The notion of warrior womanhood also appeared to paper over significant positional differences between individual women: When instructing Soledad to emulate Cassandra, the *nabual* did not acknowledge the white privilege sustaining Cassandra’s confidence and the fact that darker-skinned Indigenous women like Soledad were more frequently the target of harassment and other gender-based violence. Yet it should be noted that it was generally unusual to openly acknowledge the existence of racism in Mexico (Moreno 2016), so that it is again unlikely that the *nabual* was intentionally masking inequalities in his talk.

GENDERING POWER

Neither did all Milpaltense women employ feminised routes to power, such as “sexual seduction” – nor were such forms of power appropriate for resolving every kind of situation. During an extensive interview at her house around New Year’s, Carmen told me how she became a strong, independent woman and, eventually, a politician in order to defend vulnerable Milpaltense women from abusive male power-holders:

I am originally from Santa Ana. But when I finished high school, I went to school in the city. I went to a boarding school to study nursing. And then [...] I went to Chiapas, I went to San Luis Potosí, I went to Guanajuato, to practice. [...] For me, my biggest experience is being independent of the family. It built my character [...] In order to be this woman I am today, something had to happen. [...] My dad. [Pauses.] He was the entitled one [but my sister and I threw him out, against our mother's will, because he was a violent drunkard – you can still see the bullet holes where he shot the front door]. So, we were fighting to get the pension for my mother. We went to the authorities and unions so they would support us. And I knew how to read and write, so I took the steps and I knew how to defend my mother. And this is what led me to defend other citizens [...] I told myself that I will defend the people of Santa Ana who cannot read and write. But why did I do it? Because it took this experience of when we went to claim my mother's pension. [...] I do not forget the image of a thin lady with a thin *rebozo* (shawl) and a small bag with a small child of eight or ten years. And she says to the lawyer, "How are you, *licenciado* (graduate)? Will you help me get my pension?" And the lawyer quips, as always, "I told you, if you do not bring me this document, I will not help you." And the woman starts to cry, and she says, "*Licenciado*, please." [...] I turned to my mother and said, "We're going to go to this lawyer, but you're not going to beg, you're not going to cry either. So I'm going to talk and anyway he's not the only person who can help. We're going to see another *licenciado*."

In her words, Carmen was subjectified as a feminist politician because she had the possibility of removing herself from her life in Tlacotenco and reflect on it critically, but also in response to the discrimination she witnessed against another rural woman. This example illustrates Radcliffe's previously mentioned insight that the impact of structural gender inequalities depends on an individual's intersectional identities, which means that poor, illiterate, widowed Indigenous women are at the bottom of enduring colonial "hierarchies of difference" (2015: 4). Carmen's educational privilege and youthful self-assurance protected her and her mother from having the same experience as the other woman. Yet rather than emphasise difference, when Carmen declared that she and her mother were not the kind of woman this happens to, the declaration itself contained an

acknowledgement of similarity: a recognition that they could have been that woman, a distancing from a possible version of themselves. In Butler's terms, acts of resistance against subordination "will necessarily presuppose and reinvoke it" (1997: 12).

We approached [the lawyer], I said, "You know what? You will not treat me like you just treated that lady. If the lady does not report it, if the woman does not complain, it's her problem, but you will not treat me the same. Just tell me if you can or cannot help and I will go to another office." – "Well, I can't help you." And it was over, I went to see the other graduate and I explained what I had seen. And the lawyer told me, "Do not worry. We are going to help her." And since then, [...] I said to myself, from now on, I am going to defend the people of my town and all those who need me because it is true that the authorities abuse the ignorance of our people. Not having knowledge of [...] the rights that we are entitled to. [...] I'm going to defend. And it was 1985 or 86, when I started to get involved, [...] and helped a lot of people. Nowadays, maybe you hear people say "Doña Carmen", and I have earned that respect. I have earned it based on work, based on that I also respect people. Also, as I have always said, whether we have or have not, we must always be simple and humble because we can both be on top and be below. [...] Being outside of my town, away from our people, teaches us to value, to appreciate many things.

Carmen's narrative contained commonplace elements of Milpaltense discourse in so far as it emphasises the importance of respect and her strength, which she used to "defend" herself, her family, and her people. But it also significantly diverged from most women's discourse, as Carmen supported *Inmujeres'* mission, frequently highlighted women's rights and openly identified as a feminist. So Carmen redefined the notion of "strong womanhood" and "warriorhood" along feminist lines, rejecting the common sexual division of labour and instead making demands of her husband:

My mother tells me that when she got married, what her mother-in-law said, what her husband said, was that she had to obey. When [my sister and I] got married, she saw that we were being bossy, and we say [to our husbands], "You know what? Give your baby a bottle! Change the diaper!" [...] And my mom said, "No, this is not right." – "And why is not it okay?" – "Because

you are women and they are men.” – “Ah. That’s it?” - She says, “Yes.” [...] Then I say, “For me to have a child, I need a man. In order to take care of my son, I will also need my partner. And then the chores are for both.”

Although Carmen insisted that times were changing and women no longer had to be “submissive” (*sumisas*) in Milpa Alta, her feminism, outspokenness, and independence were viewed critically by many Milpaltenses. As was also the case for another female politician I spoke to from Milpa Alta, her marriage was put under strain by her political ambitions, as her former husband complained that she was not fulfilling her duties. While this could give the impression that women are only allowed to be “strong” up to a point, it is important to remember that Carmen mixes both feminine and masculine types of power. The pushback female politicians often faced was not typically occasioned by a perceived excess of strength, but specifically by their intrusion into a typically male field of power.

Though she did not mention it herself, Carmen has been the target of gossip. Some viewed her as “*abusada*” (quick-witted), and others as “*abusiva*” (outrageous). For example, one day in July, when the days were hot and storms came up in the afternoons, Bety brought up a rumour that the *coordinador* (town mayor) of Tlactotenco was resigning because he was caught drunk and messing around with a young woman. Lizbeth responded passionately, insisting that it was either untrue or that he was set up, saying: “men are weak”, and “they set a trap for him”. Instead, she suggested that his political rivals might have been spreading the rumour to damage his reputation for their own benefit and insisted that if he really had resigned, the *tlacuateras* should insist that he may not. After all, they had supported his campaign and felt invested in his success. The others nodded when Lizbeth opined that he had been doing great work and that people might be jealous, coveting his position. When I related this to Socorro, she said that the rumour sounded made up, given that the *coordinador* was known to avoid drink and had a great relationship with his wife and three daughters.

Two days later, Lizbeth said that she went to the *coordinación* building to talk to the *coordinador* “from woman to man” and make sure he would not resign, but he had left the building and did not return quickly enough for them to talk. Because Bety had refused to reveal her source, the other *tlacuateras* suspected that it was Carmen who was not only his political rival, but also Bety’s *comadre*, and “drags Bety everywhere”. They speculated that

Carmen, “*la malvada*” (the maleficent one), might have had an interest in damaging the *coordinador*’s reputation. She and her colleagues were considered to be “*gente vulgar*” (crude people) and even violent by the *tlacuateras*. They did not allow Carmen to come to political events they were involved in. Rocio recalled an episode in which Carmen allegedly hit her and said the woman accompanying Carmen was even worse. They also said Carmen takes credit for organising all sorts of things, like the pyramid sculpture in the churchyard and other buildings, but actually is only showing her face at the scene, seeking attention and creating confusion. Lizbeth believed it was Carmen who incited public outrage against the previous priest who was alleged to have stolen church money. She claimed to have seen Carmen conspiring with another woman in the background while the mob was pounding on the priest’s door. As the story went, the bishop had to rush to the scene in order to make peace and prevent the people from lynching the priest – apparently the mob had gasoline ready to set him on fire. At home, Socorro said, Father Jesús had a hard time re-establishing trust in the church and was only welcomed in Tlacotenco by a handful of people, including herself. Father Jesús has since made an effort to be transparent about how church money is used, and clarified that more extravagant expenses, such as a splendid chair he uses in mass, were paid out of his own pocket.

Whether any of the above stories are true, does not concern us. What it does show, is the strategic use of gender stereotypes to establish or destroy the fragile trustworthiness of local politicians. It also shows gossip as a feminine “violence” that can be used for both “orderly” and “chaotic” purposes (see previous chapter), much like sorcery and sexual seduction. Carmen was painted as an essentially violent and untrustworthy person by emphasising that she associated with individuals with a violent reputation, selfishly sought attention (*protagonismo*, a negative trait in both men and women), and was potentially influential enough to create a lynch mob through pure “gossip”. The *coordinador*, on the other hand, was considered an innocent victim of his gender: If he had been drunkenly seduced, he would merely have been a victim of men’s supposed weak moral constitution and inability to withstand sexual urges. Even male violence, when self-serving, was usually portrayed as a marker of weakness rather than strength. On the other hand, his gender was the reason why people found Bety’s story believable to begin with. If the claims had been proven true, the *coordinador* would have been expected to stand down, as the highest representative of the pueblo is expected to be also a moral leader, who stays out of temptation’s way. The gendered division of

spheres of power means that the typically male field of electoral politics is difficult for women to enter and find acceptance in. Interpreting malevolent uses of these feminine forms of power as violence, like the *tlacualeras* did, often stretched the meaning of violence beyond its common usage in English. While feminine and masculine forms of violence were considered to be symbolically equivalent by many Milpaltenses, very few would have maintained that these are equivalent in practice.

The paradox of feminine power

By highlighting women's power and potential for violence, the present chapter goes against the grain of previous analyses of violence against Indigenous women in Latin America. According to Mayblin, "the power of Catholic gender imagery and the prevalence of patriarchal structures has long focused gender theorists on the supposed tyranny of *machista* men and their oppression of women" (2011: 136). For example, Melhuus and Stolen (1996) argued that rural Mexican women's status depended on their virtuous, virgin-like conduct, whereas men's status depended on defending their honour, which in turn hinged on their ability to control their wives. Analyses of this kind emphasise competing agendas, power imbalances, and violent antagonism between genders. Conversely, Mayblin suggests that her interlocutors in north-eastern Brazil, where conjugal violence was common, "downplay[ed] the *difference* between men and women, and foregrounded the *similarity* of their moral plight" (2011: 148, emphasis in the original). While in analytical terms, "systematic political, economic, and legal advantage in Brazil [...] privilege men" (ibid.), Mayblin's interlocutors were not concerned about power asymmetries in themselves, but about whether those in power were acting in accordance with the Christian spirit of love and generosity, rather than selfish pride.

Similar to this Brazilian case, the present chapter has shown that Milpaltenses were aware of power imbalances between genders but discursively focused more on similarity than difference. This had the effect that machismo and patriarchy were rarely spoken about as such, even though few would have disputed their hold on Milpa Alta when asked directly. While many attributed different kinds of power to men and women, they often considered both genders equally capable of defensive and destructive forms of violence. Rather than condemn all kinds of violence, many Milpaltenses differentiated between

strugglers and warriors whom they perceived as fighting for the communal good in the spirit of love, and looked down on feminists and politicians whom they viewed as selfishly working for their own benefit. In principle, this dichotomy applied to both genders, but there was a much greater discursive emphasis on women, likely in order to highlight the perceived difference between women in Milpa Alta and elsewhere (cf. Muehlmann 2013: 133). At the same time, it was possible for some individuals, like Carmen, to identify as a warrior, feminist, and politician at once, and denounce machismo in her community, thus redefining the relationship between gender and power. Following High's concept of "gendered agency", which "refers not just to the gendered identities or actual roles of women and men but also to the underlying cosmology that attributes distinct capacities and symbolic values to male and female bodies" (2010: 755), Milpaltense women's subjectivities were shaped more or less consciously, and simultaneously with and against local cosmologies of violence and gender.

It follows that the symbolic and the experiential sphere are not separate: While discourse does not simply equal practice, the latter is often influenced by symbolic representations. Following Bourdieu's (1977, 2001) definition of "symbolic violence", many European men and women have internalised that women are inferior to men so that women accept being treated accordingly. By contrast, Wallace controversially argued that "the myth of the superwoman" held black women in the US back from developing a subjectivity that would allow them to challenge male hegemony within the Black Power movement: "precisely because of the myth of their inferiority, the black female stereotype, had always portrayed them as oversexed, physically strong and warlike" (1990: xx). The Milpaltense material suggests that mythic imagery of women as powerful warriors may influence women's decisions in the face of violence, but not predictably so: Her understanding of "strong womanhood" may have caused Carmen's mother to stay in her extremely violent marriage, while Carmen's feminist expansion of this subjectivity caused her to defend her mother from her father and refuse bad treatment from her former husband. We can see then that "strong womanhood" and "warrior womanhood" are highly dynamic subjectivities which may be stretched into opposite directions. Many of my Milpaltense interlocutors had internalised that women and men are equals, so that women did not easily accept mistreatment. Similar to other women's statements, this was illustrated by Conchita's words, "*nunca me dejé*" (I always stood up for myself).

Despite similar images of women as fighters and defenders existing in other parts of Latin America, studies of violence against women have rarely investigated the cosmological underpinnings of these notions. In her cosmological study of violent gender relations in the Andean region of Northern Potosí, Peru, Harris provocatively asserted that physical violence against women was normalised to the extent that it did not provoke the same level of emotional distress as it would in Britain, despite quoting widows as saying “I don’t want to remarry and get beaten again” (1994: 49). She argued that because “marriage is tied for women to the status of a victim of male predation” (ibid.: 54), enacting the mythical image of the condor stealing lambs, women paradoxically feel less like victims, as violence is already expected.

Equally paradoxical, Milpaltenses frequently claimed that wives are as powerful as their husbands, while also acknowledging that violence against women is a common phenomenon. This statement only makes sense if we consider Milpaltense understandings of feminine power, which decouple being subject to violence from being “powerless”. They therefore complicated feminist activist and scholarly analyses which explain violence against women with women’s social oppression. Among the *tlacuáleras*, women of considerably different age, levels of class privilege, relationship status, and education had experienced violence in their lives. By collectively and individually constructing themselves as “strong women” and “warriors”, women did not deny the existence of certain gender inequalities in their community, including in the spheres of politics, education, and inheritance, or that these intersectionally disadvantaged some individuals more than others, but chose to emphasise their resilience with respect to life’s challenges, as well as their potential for violence.

The notion of the warrior woman reflects the interwovenness of local constructions of identity (see also Chapter 1), as it draws from various iconic moments in the imagined past of Milpaltense womanhood, including women’s roles as Aztec warriors, defenders of the Catholic faith, and fighters in the Revolution. It also points to women’s inherent association with sexual and herbal magic, which may be enhanced via shamanic techniques. While basic sexual magic can be learned by all, advanced sexual magic is only taught by female *nabuales* to female apprentices.

However, with the arrival of generic medicine brands, fast-food, and cheap retailers, it had become difficult to survive on many traditional forms of women’s labour,

such as cooking and weaving, and in the case of traditional midwifery, the profession had disappeared altogether. These developments had considerably diminished women's access to power in the community. As the sexual divisions of labour of the ancestors had not rigid and were now becoming increasingly permeable, it is unsurprising that some women have entered politics, like some men have learned to weave. Interestingly, there seemed to be a tendency for men to be welcomed into formerly feminine spaces, whereas women often seemed to find rejection among both male and female peers when entering masculine spaces. This was particularly accentuated in the example of female politicians, who were rarely selected for top positions and faced more negative gossip than their male colleagues. Note that in the historical example narrated by the *nabual*, the female politician Aurora Fernández was powerful because she deployed her feminine power of seduction. In the realm of ritual, sexual divisions remained largely intact, as I will discuss in depth in Chapter 6.

It appears then that for some Milpaltenses, the sexes could only be equal if their powers remained separate. High (2010) argued that Waorani people in Amazonian Ecuador attributed distinct, yet non-hierarchical forms of power to men and women, as Waorani men rarely beat their wives, contradicting theories of an emerging global "hegemonic masculinity", in which males occupy a dominant, antagonistic position vis-à-vis females (Moore 1994: 62). In Milpa Alta, I have recorded discourses both of "gendered agency", such as that of the *nabual*, and of "hegemonic masculinity," such as that of Inmujeres, indicating the contested nature of gender equality in this context. Complicating matters further, there is a certain level of cross-fertilisation between different models of gender equality: The Milpaltense branch of Inmujeres occasionally drew on the warrior woman trope in its publications, while the in many respects traditional "strong woman" Conchita was trained in a feminist programme of the Instituto de Liderazgo Simone de Beauvoir (Leadership Institute Simone de Beauvoir), alongside rural women from other parts of Mexico.

Thus, theories of power as vertical control, including "hegemonic masculinity", are insufficient for understanding horizontal creative and spiritual forms of power, which are more strongly associated with femininity than masculinity in Milpa Alta. According to Fernandes, the social sciences have largely treated "power as something that is limiting and which is interchangeable with control," (2003: 17). The secular Foucauldian

understanding of power in particular provides us with the bleak prospect of never being able to escape unequal power structures, as agency is defined by “historically contingent discursive traditions in which [individuals] are located” (Mahmood 2005: 32). Applied to Milpa Alta, it erases the agency of women and ignores the possibility that “larger truths which transcend the limited forms we have produced *do* exist” (Fernandes 2003: 20; cf. Hartsock 1989). The *guerrereras*’, Conchita’s, and other Milpaltense women’s spirituality often pointed to a particular understanding of power, which was not primarily about hierarchy, but emphasised women’s love, generosity, creativity and resilience, based on “a transcendent sense of interconnection that moves beyond the knowable, visible world” (ibid.: 10).

In conclusion, feminine power appeared paradoxical in Milpa Alta, but it would more accurately be described as perspectival: Whether a woman is powerful or powerless depends on the cosmological frame from which her situation is constructed and observed (i.e., which concepts and systems of meaning are available to one’s analysis). The same event may at once be empowering and disempowering for the women involved, as in the example of the *nabual*’s talk on managing sexual harassment. In so far as the capacity to inflict violence upon others is a function of power, it follows that violence is also perspectival. As I have argued in the previous chapter, the cultural logics underpinning seemingly common-sense categories, such as power and violence, are always emergent and embedded in a complex social world. Accordingly, “subjectivity – the felt interior experience of the person that includes his or her positions in a field of relational power – is produced through the experience of violence and the manner in which global flows [...] become entangled with local logics in identity formation” (Das and Kleinman 2000: 1). Therefore, feminine warrior subjectification is in dialogue with Milpaltense gender and Indigeneity politics, which present women with contrasting notions of “gendered agency”, which portrays men and women as different but equal, and “hegemonic masculinity”, which portrays them as essentially the same but unequal. The symbol of feminine warriorhood can be stretched to signify both traditionalist and progressive subjectivities and the manifold subjectivities in between these, shedding light on how Milpaltenses reconcile the pressure to create a coherent “Indigenous” identity, imposed by liberal multiculturalism, with the multiplicity of dynamic subjectivities within their society, weaving a multiplicity of threads into what appears as a single fabric.

CONCLUSIONS

The material presented shows that the international feminist activist narrative which influenced some Milpaltenses to perceive women as victims of male violence was undercut by competing notions of women as violent perpetrators and resilient “strong women” and “warriors.” Thus, we find in many Milpaltense women’s self-fashioning another process of meaning-making which challenged mainstream understandings of what violence and being a woman is. While women were often idealised as creative and hardworking members and defenders of their families and community, their “power” was not viewed wholly positively. Unlike Inmujeres’ positive concept of “empowerment”, which implicitly suggests that women do not already have power, the power many Milpaltenses associated with the largely feminine domains of motherhood, cooking, magic and gossip was viewed ambivalently, in light of its potential to do harm – as was also the case for typically masculine domains of power, such as politics. The separate-but-equal model of power emerging from this perspective may also be viewed as entailing a certain level of inequality, as the gendering of spheres of power meant that “masculine” domains of power remained difficult for women to engage and find acceptance in. Nonetheless, it would be incorrect to conclude that the common local assertion that “men and women are equally powerful” were simply an ideology designed to mask systemic gender inequality (what some might misleadingly refer to as “cultural violence”; see previous Chapter 2), as Milpaltenses often simultaneously expressed concern about violence against women.

Therefore, common statements that wives and husbands are equally powerful and that violence against women is a common phenomenon were not contradictory in the sense that they expressed the co-existence of different models of gender relations within the same space. I suggest that many Milpaltenses were unaware of the ways in which notions of “strong womanhood” and “warrior womanhood” might help to sustain patriarchal structures in their community, as they may have prevented some women from questioning intersectionally disadvantaged women’s subordinate sociopolitical position in Milpa Alta. In other words, this femininity discourse glossed over differences between women as well as over structural inequalities between men and women. However, at the

same time as they deemphasised these highly important differences, which were strongly linked to women's likelihood of experiencing violence, these notions also highlighted feminine forms of power which are obscured by Inmujeres' feminist discourse. The meaningfulness of these feminine forms of power should not be dismissed out of hand, as they inspired many women to be resilient in fighting for the common good. The case of Carmen the politician shows that it is possible to fruitfully reconcile feminist empowerment and Milpaltense notions of power: rather than effectively forcing women to choose between two paths to power, it is possible that a combination of the two would attract more women than Inmujeres' current approach. In brief, examining the sociocultural construction of violence against women and its cosmological underpinnings is important because it has implications for the success of development projects. Yet given Milpaltense women's position at the intersection of gender and ethnoracial discrimination, all paths to feminine power, feminist or not, individual or collective, come at a cost.

5. Dangerous Love

Y aunque me cueste la vida, Llorona, no dejaré de quererte.
(*And if it costs my life, Weeping Woman, I won't stop loving you.*)
Traditional – “La Llorona” (popular Mexican folk song)

“We misunderstand what love is,” Magdalena told me emphatically. In the experience of the 36-year old single mother, much is at stake in defining love. Following the wrong definition may bring heartache and ruin. Thus, love is doubly dangerous: dangerous as an idea, and dangerous as a force in people’s lives.

The observation that romantic love, *eros*, can be dangerous has a long history in Christian theology, where it is associated with selfish and possessive desires (Nygren 1982). “These violent delights have violent ends”, wrote Shakespeare of his star-crossed lovers from feuding elite families, *Romeo and Juliet*. A Trojan prince’s illicit love for a Greek king’s wife began an interminable war in the *Illiad*. Regardless, almost everywhere, at least some individuals recklessly “fall in love” (Fischer and Jankowiak 1992), and the societies they live in have different ways of containing the risks. For example, Umeda people in the Sepik District of New Guinea typically married cross-cousins, reserving love for adultery, which was veiled in strict secrecy to guard against retribution by assault, or sorcery (Gell 2011). In light of these dangers, indiscretion was considered the worst form of betrayal among lovers, while society did not want secrets. Indeed, while marriage involved complete knowledge of the other, love was hidden to the extent that the Umeda language had no word for it, demonstrating the close relationship between the power of love and its conceptualisation (ibid.). Similarly, among Egyptian Bedouins, romance was viewed as a threat to the social system, based on values of honour, modesty and male kinsmen’s authority, but poetry was a safe way for sweethearts to express their sentiments of love and vulnerability (Abu-Lughod 1999).

In some postcolonial contexts, violence may be represented not just as a risk, but as an intrinsic feature of romantic love. “Central to Latin American coloniality [...] has been white(r) men’s sexual access to, and rape of, low-income, largely rural, indigenous women [...] and indigenous femininity’s association with lack of worth” (Radcliffe 2015: 19). Coloniality refers to how patterns of power which were established during colonial rule remain entrenched in postcolonial contexts, and mutually reinforce each other, including the “gender system” (Lugones 2007: 191). For example, Hawaiian wife-beaters invoked the notion that a slap were “Hawaiian love” to legitimise their violent acts at group therapy sessions (Merry 2009: 70). In the case of Kyrgyz bride “theft”, the practice has become popular because it shortens courtship, but the performance of male dominance, and female resistance it involves, makes it difficult to distinguish between consenting girlfriends and kidnapping victims (O’Neill Borbieva 2012). A similarly ambivalent practice of “stealing” (*robar*) wives is widespread in rural Latin America (Harris 1980, 1998), and also occurs in Milpa Alta, often to avoid the considerable cost of a more prestigious *boda en blanco* (“white wedding”) in church, which requires providing food and entertainment for the extended family, friends, and neighbours, which may include several hundred people. However, it seems facile to explain such practices solely in terms of coloniality (as some anthropologists and Milpaltenses do), as forms of war, slavery, and rape pre-date Spanish colonialism in Mexico (Potthast 2010: 11).

Conversely, companionate love, or “familial love” (Schneider 1968), is often imagined as a purely positive force⁵¹. According to Christian theology, *agape* flows from God, and for many Brazilian Catholics in rural northern Brazil, God’s love flows into the world via mother love (Mayblin 2012). The dark side of this “pure” love is revealed when orphans who had never received such motherly love were doubted to be able to love their own children (ibid.). Similarly, Catholic Filipina immigrants in Japan who marry for money or work as hostesses may profess to be acting selflessly, emulating God’s love, because they often send more than half of their earnings back to their families in the Philippines, but are denigrated as immoral prostitutes in both countries (Faier 2007).

The dangers of love are thus clearly linked to broader structures of power, such as modern capitalism (Durkheim 1933; Goody 1983; MacFarlane 1987; Lipset 2004; Vaughan 2009), imperialist liberalism (Povinelli 2006), and globalization (Padila et al.

⁵¹ But see, e.g., Scheper-Hughes (1992) for the violent face of family life.

2008). In the same way as love is shaped by these structures, it also reshapes these. While some have argued that the “affective individualism” (Stone 1990) of modern romantic love severed the strong kinship bonds that characterised the pre-modern world, others have shown that no such opposition need exist, as blood relatives’ love may be as volatile and conditional as romantic love (Weston 1991: 61-64). Similar to the Andean context (van Vleet 2008), I have observed the co-presence of strong family bonds and passionate romance in Milpa Alta, which occasionally poses dilemmas of loyalty for the individual, and, in some instances, gives rise to violence.

Magdalena’s statement above was aimed at challenging the common Milpaltense view that one must suffer for love. In this chapter, I will argue that Milpaltense understandings of love and violence are closely interrelated, and contested. For many Milpaltenses, both violence and love operate as powerful agents of transformation, certain kinds of which may sustain the local ideal of gender complementarity, while others challenge it. Virtually turning this logic on its head, for Inmujeres, violence threatens healthy, independent self-love and is inherent to pathologically self-sacrificial love or co-dependency. Thus, the simultaneous circulation of different concepts of love, in itself a complex category, brings forth political frictions. I will begin by providing some background on Latin American ideas of love, and then introduce the two contrasting concepts of love in Milpa Alta via Magdalena’s rendition of her life history. Next, I will expand on each of these concepts, which will lead me to conclude that both forms of love require sacrifices in this social context, inherently linking love and violence.

Love as *mana*

Given the ways in which Christian and Indigenous cosmologies are interwoven in Latin America, it is unsurprising that love is a major concept throughout the subcontinent, appearing frequently in ethnographies of Mexico, particularly those dealing with Nahua communities (Good 2015; Adapon 2008; Taggart 2007; Hirsch 2003; Raby 1999; Quezada 1989), Brazil (Mayblin 2010; Del Priore 2005; Rebhuhn 1999; Scheper-Hughes 1992), Peru (Harvey 1998; Millones and Pratt 1992; Santos-Granero 1991) and other countries (Overing and Passes 2000; Douglass 1992). For instance, in Catholic North-eastern Brazil, it acts as a form of “socio-ontological glue” and “animating force” (Mayblin 2012: 245).

This understanding of love evokes Durkheim’s expansion of the Maori concept, *mana*, as a “physical force and a moral power” that compels people to act and “defer to society’s orders”, while being “always on the point of escaping the places they occupy and invading all that passes within their reach” (cit. in Mazzarella 2017: 1).



FIGURE 20: TLACOTENSE WEDDING

Most ethnographers of love and power in Latin America have focused more on the ordering potential of love than on its excesses. For example, Douglass (1992) showed that while elite Jamaicans claimed to marry “for love” and may genuinely have been following their gut instincts, they also typically chose partners of their own colour within their class, as they considered it natural for love to blossom among those who are alike. This endogamy cemented patterns of inequality, revealing love as a form of power. A similar concept of love emerged from the multi-generational ethnography of a Mexican elite family, where members were at once expected to marry for love *and* into a Catholic and “honourable”, meaning, high-status, family (Adler Lomnitz and Pérez-Lizaur 1987: 135). Love’s potential to disrupt order and establish a new order becomes apparent when Cubans expressed their commitment to the Revolution in a manner that evoked romantic,

or mystical, ecstasy (Holbraad 2014). For Amazonian Yanomami people, love and anger were in fact inextricably linked, as the cosmic force of anger must be actively transformed into love in order to enable sociality, but is in constant danger of transforming back (Alès 2000). Similarly, Amazonian Waorani people have been described as relating to other ethnic groups via shared experiences of violence and victimhood (High 2015: 98-120).

Much as in the Brazilian example, love powers Milpaltense society, invoked most frequently in reference to the loving relationship between husband and wife, the relationship between mother and child, saint and devotee, *comunero/a* and land. Marriage is understood as a union of love in which husband and wife work “as one” and are responsible for each other, modelling how the community as a whole comes to be happy and productive through reciprocal exchanges of labour (cf. Taggart 2007). In Nahuatl, love is simply translated as *tlazohltlaliztli*, whereas in Spanish it is expressed via a number of different words, the key one being *amor*, which is also used to refer to God’s love. Between lovers, this term is avoided until full commitment is established, up to which point *querer*, which points more to desire, is used instead. Those romantically inclined may also speak of their beloved being their *ilusión* (dream), *corazón* (heart), or *vida* (life). Between friends or family members, Milpaltenses often spoke of feeling *cariño* (loving affection), and *ternura* (tenderness) in reference to children and pets. Another common term was “*apapacho*”, literally meaning hugs and cuddles, but which also expressed an intimate relationship, being loved and cared for, even pampered and indulged. For instance, a female teacher justified not identifying as a feminist at an Inmujeres event with liking *apapacho* too much. In terms of its etymology, *apapacho* derives from the Nahuatl verb *pahpatzoa*, which means “pressing” or “mashing”. Both the teacher’s comment and the word’s etymology suggest a link between love and violence, that one may be the other’s cost.

Milpaltenses also used love and respect interchangeably at times. A Tlacotencan friend of mine who was writing a master’s thesis on the specificities of Tlacotencan Nahuatl told me that “Nahuatl [...] displays love excessively.” (*El náhuatl ... demuestra de manera excesiva el amor.*) He gave the example of the reverential suffixes on names or the sophisticated agglutinative verbs, which may string multiple morphemes together to form the equivalent of complex sentences in English. For instance, there is a major distinction in politeness between posing the question “How are you?” as the informal “*Quen tica?*”

when speaking to a child or two a close friend, and instead asking “*Quen timomatziñoa?*” My friend translated this as, “Venerable Sir [or Lady], how are you feeling?” (*Venerable señor, ¿cómo se encuentra usted?*) The highest register of speech, *Huehuehtlabtolli* (old people’s speech) employs metaphors because it “feels the spirits, makes one cry” (*siente a los espíritus, hace llorar*), transforming the question into “*Quen yoltziñoa?*” (Literally: “How is the revered heart feeling?”) These examples convey how respect is linked to discipline and love: It requires not only practice and dedication, but also a willingness to display affection, to master the *Huehuehtlabtolli* register of speech.

Thus, Nahuatl speakers tend to associate their language with the expression of love, and love with respect, or reverence. Whether speaking Spanish or Nahuatl, a younger person must address an older person with respect. In Nahuatl, the reverential suffix is –*tziñ*, so the name Pedro might be rendered as *Pelotziñ* in polite Nahuatl speech. In Spanish, the equivalent would be adding a “*Don*” or “*Doña*” before a name, thus forming “Don Pedro” in this example, and using the “*usted*” instead of the “*tú*” in addressing him. Some older couples also use these reverential forms with each other. An older person may address a younger one with “*tú*”, but may also perform an eloquent *huehuehtlabtolli*-speech for them to mark a special occasion, or an important piece of advice for them. While only a handful of elders is capable of performing *huehuehtlabtolli* in Nahuatl, the sentiment of it is sometimes translated into Spanish, according to some of my Tlacotecan friends.

In brief, love is a complex category in Milpa Alta. Yet to simplify the following discussion, I will focus on just two kinds of love, broadly defined: the self-sacrificial love between spouses in a conventional Milpaltense marriage, and the individualistic self-love promoted by Inmujeres. The distinction between these types will become apparent in the example of Magdalena’s life story.

MAGDALENA’S STORY

Magdalena is a cheerful, tall, light-skinned and bespectacled, 36-year-old woman from my weaving course. She describes herself as a critical thinker, who was taught about the ways and philosophy of her ancestors by her great uncle and aunt, and is “not a very devout Catholic”. In what follows, I have reordered and slightly edited her long narrative for flow

but left her phrasings and choice of words intact. In the first part of her story, she described that being rejected by her father and teased at school forced her to become a strong woman:

I am an only child on my mother's side but I have many siblings on my father's side. Today it's very common in Mexico and around the world not to have many children, but 36 years ago, people took notice. I was "the girl with no father". This absence left a mark. I had to become stronger because there was no father to defend me from some boy or anyone. It was difficult. When I was 12 years old, my mom told me, "That man over there is your father." So I went closer to greet him. He was talking to a man and when he sees me coming, he gets into his car and starts it. I stood in the middle of the street, so as to stop him, but he wouldn't. I realised that my father wanted to kill me. For me, this moment was very painful and it forced me to acknowledge that I was alone. I had to confront that, and make myself stronger. When I was sad because of my father, or I was having a bad day, my mom said to me: "Look, *mija*. You're neither going to be the first, nor the only, nor the last one. Unfortunately, there will be more children like this. If Benito Juárez could, without a mother, without a father, without even speaking Spanish, and he went on to be President, why can't you?" And I said, "Yes, that's certain." [Laughs.]

Benito Juárez was a well-loved, Indigenous Mexican president, who was particularly admired by Milpaltenses alongside the Nahuatl-speaking hero of the Mexican Revolution, Emiliano Zapata. These historical figures were often mentioned as giving socially and economically disadvantaged Milpaltenses like Magdalena hope that they, too, might succeed against the odds. Magdalena did not waste time to highlight happy memories of her childhood:

I've always been very cheerful. My mom tried to give me all the love (*cariño*) and attention I didn't get from my father. Since I was five years old, she entered me into all the painting and dancing competitions, and I won many. Maybe I was the only contestant. [Laughs.] I was in a folkloric dance group for eight years. All that she was able to afford, she gave me. She went through depression because of the absence of this person who wouldn't agree to

marry her and share a life with her. They were sweethearts for eight years, so it was very disappointing. After being together so long, she had expected something else. My mom was an elementary school teacher. She couldn't take me to work, so I lived in my great uncle's home. My great uncle and aunt, *mis tíos*, were like my grandparents. Neither had married, nor did they have children. So I was like the grandchild, or child, they never had. They took care of me and pampered me a lot. I grew up with cousins my age. So I was never lonely, or lacked for playmates. We played ball, climbed trees... It was a beautiful childhood. I lived very happily with them. We didn't have much, but we had this contact with nature and it was so nice. When the corn was dry, we'd thresh it with our fingers. I don't remember them ever saying, "Help us." It came naturally to me to help them. They had a way of teaching without coercion. They made me want to help in a nice way.

So her mother and the government's competitions encouraged Magdalena to be ambitious and apply herself. Her great uncle and aunt, who were Nahuatl-speakers, maintained a traditional subsistence lifestyle working the field, keeping livestock and weaving. They taught her to appreciate nature and to think of work not as a chore, but as something you do for yourself and those you love.

I was a good student, getting good grades. I fell in love for the first time when I was in high school. But with my mother, this was a taboo topic. She didn't want the same happening to me as had happened to her. She said, "I strongly suggest that you study hard and don't get distracted. You can have all the friends you want but no boyfriends." Since primary school, there were several boys who wanted me for their girlfriend. In secondary school, too. I was terrified. I didn't like it. I knew they wanted something, and it wasn't money. [Laughs.] I told them no, and some took it badly, like, "I'll make you pay for that." I explained that it wasn't because of the person but because I wasn't interested in a relationship. This makes you tougher (*más ruda*). Because, who is going to be there for you? Well, nobody. I didn't have a great sense of self-esteem, but I had a drive for survival. I didn't have self-esteem, none at all!

Magdalena emphasised not having had self-esteem because this is something she said she only acquired much later in life, by attending Inmujeres' courses. She confirmed the view

expressed by Sebastián and some other male interlocutors that Milpaltense women are “*rudas*”, explaining it as a defence against unwanted male attention and threats.

I had my first boyfriend at 20 years of age – quite old! Many other girls in middle school (*secundaria*) held hands with boys, or exchanged kisses. No, I had none of that! My first boyfriend, I saw him about five times. I was studying and I wanted for him to come see me, to be more attentive (*detallista*) and so on. The truth is, he wasn't. He liked me, but then I saw him at a party with another girl. This is only the first one, and already like that! It reaffirmed the theory about my father. ¡*Qué rayos!* (Damn!) And then another boy courted me and I liked him a lot. But he wanted a sexual relationship and I said no, like my grandparents told me to. “Not until you're married!” [Laughs.] So I had this idea. I was beginning to discover my body, but I said no! And I was disappointed that he wouldn't hold my hand. Like we'd go to the park and then finally he'd hug me. I didn't like that. If you want me, take my hand from the start! [Laughs.]

First love

Never having had a father figure – her great uncle suffered from paranoia and spent a lot of the time on the field – and having waited so long before starting a serious relationship, being repeatedly disappointed by men, Magdalena found herself feeling starved for love. When she finally fell in love, she fell hard:

I studied Biology at university for four years. Then in the last year, I found an [hesitates] *amiguito* (little friend) who is now the father of my son. He... I knew from my cousin that he had problems of alcoholism and drug addiction. And he followed me around. So I said, “Yes, I like you, but you're quite damaged.” But then I said, let's give him a chance and see. As he was an addict, he was also addicted to people. [Laughs.] He was excessively loving (*cariñoso*). And this caught my attention because the others had been so flaky. He would take off his coat and give it to me and he'd hug and take my hand in front of everyone. What I had always wanted. He showed me off to everyone. But I didn't know who I was with! [Laughs.] Small detail. I fell in

love with this *personita*. And initially, I confess that I didn't love him (*no lo quería*). I mean I liked him (*me gustaba*) but I didn't love him (*no lo amaba*). I didn't love him (*no lo quería*) just like that. But, little by little, he won me over (*me fue ganando*) with many attentions and with his protective side, which I had longed for so much.

Magdalena's story conveys the intoxicating quality of new love, describing it as a process of growth. She interpreted not having to keep her love secret as an indicator of the relationship being secure, but also expressed not really having known what her then-boyfriend was really like. This emphasis on knowledge echoes Gell's (2011) observations about the ambivalent nature of romantic secrecy: Love may require secrecy to blossom, but an established couple is, by definition, public knowledge. Her choice of words shows that there is some slippage between different ways of expressing love.

We were together three, six months and then what had to happen, happened. I came to know sex with him. I liked it, it gave me confidence (*confianza*). But what I didn't like from the time we were dating was that he was very violent. [Serious, quiet.] He was violent, and he took drugs and drank. I told him, "It's your life but you're hurting yourself." He insisted, "Nothing's going to happen." Then I got pregnant. When I told him, I was hoping that he'd support me because I wanted to abort. [Almost whispering.] And it was a difficult situation. I was at the end of my studies, working on my thesis. And so I told him to support me. But no. [Groans.] To the contrary. He begins to shout, "What joy, what happiness!" And he shouts at everyone around, "I'm going to be a dad!" And so, whatever (*ni modo*). I had to have him because otherwise everyone would have known what I did. And he wanted to marry me. He did want to. He presented me to his family and they were very happy. He was a train wreck (*muchacho bien desviado*) and I was a good girl. So they were like, "That's great!" When I realised this, it was hard. Even the pregnancy because I didn't want it. They told me, "Marry, Magda! We'll prepare the wedding. We'll raise the money between us." But I said, "I don't ever want to get married." And it was hard because they had all come together for this. I don't know how I found the courage to tell them that I didn't want to marry him because I didn't agree with this way of behaving. Before this

happened, before they knew I was pregnant, I travelled to Europe with two of my cousins for two and a half months, and they didn't know! The first months of my pregnancy, I lost weight because I had morning sickness and I also tried to lose weight to hide my pregnancy. And when I came back, I was seven months pregnant. My aunts were very surprised. He was waiting for me, and I said, "I will marry you but don't tell anyone." It was under pressure.

So while Magdalena enjoyed the passionate side of her relationship, she was aware of her then-boyfriend's violent side early on. Once she was pregnant, she lost control over her body: Her boyfriend and his family effectively forced her to have a baby she did not want, as having an abortion in Mexico City is legal, but being known to have done it means being socially ostracised. She sought to take back some of the control over her body by losing weight, concealing her pregnancy, and going on a fun, distracting trip, away from her partner.

So then I lived with him. And I came to realise how many drugs he was taking. And I get worried for my baby. He collapsed and I told him, "you can't be in this state." He was taking pills of Flunitrazepam (a potent sedative) and would sleep. He smoked marihuana. He is a very insecure man. He manages his insecurity with violence. He can't be around people without being high, otherwise he feels like they're looking at him, judging him... He told me not to go, but I left him and went back to my home. Then it turns out he got even more addicted (*se daba más al vicio*). He stole money from his father, bought more pills, like 40, and they arrested him with all those pills and took him for a dealer. So he calls me, "I'm in jail." [Laughs.] And I'm like, "I don't care!" And later his dad spoke to me. His problems stemmed from having lost his mom when he was little.

Magdalena had a vivid way of narrating this story, mocking her then-boyfriend's sheepish tone in calling her from jail, continuously injecting humour into what might otherwise seem like a depressing story. She did not justify his addictions and his choices, or indeed his violence, but explained them as stemming from an underlying insecurity, having lacked motherly love and support as a young child.

And it was co-dependency. I don't know if it was love. Who knows if it was lo-, I don't know what it was. Later – who knows. It was between co-dependency and deep love (*amor*), and I misunderstood love. Here people think love for women is that you have to give it all for love. The more you suffer, the more you love. And so I thought, I do love him. [Laughs.] With my mom I went to see him in jail three times a week while I was pregnant. Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays. Three times a week. That's how he noticed how much I had invested in him, that things had worked out for him. And we loved each other very much, the way we understood it. I believe it was a *cariño* and an *amor* or *pasión* (passion), I don't know... It was genuine.

“Co-dependency” is another word Magdalena learned from *Inmujeres*, but she seemed ambivalent about it. While she was taught that she had “misunderstood” love and that Milpaltense women generally have a “wrong” understanding of love, which emphasises suffering, she has a visceral memory of genuinely having felt in love with her ex that conflicts with her “better” knowledge.

He was incarcerated for 10 months. When the baby came, early in the morning, I went to the doctor but he couldn't attend to me because he didn't have electricity. So I went back home. “I'll just have to deal with it (*aguantarme*).” But my mom says no, I can't leave you like this. So she got another taxi, took me to another clinic. When he got out of jail he promised me by God (*Diosito santo*) that truly he would work and this and that... And for a while we lived together immensely happy. It was a very beautiful time. We lived in his father's house with his brother and his wife. Then my sister-in-law left. And I had fun being the one decorating the Christmas tree, preparing the dinner, doing this and that... And they were happy because they all were looking for a woman like that, his mother had been like that. His sisters hadn't. We lived in harmony. For three years, we were pretty happy. Then I said, let's marry. But he didn't want to anymore and I accepted that. I'm glad, because if I had to divorce him, he would not have consented.

In this part of her life story, Magdalena presented herself as a virtuous strong woman, who deals with hardship (*aguanta*), gives her child's father a chance at redemption, and acts as an ideal housewife, even expressing a willingness to get married. In Hispanic

Catholicism, *la madre sufrida* (“the suffering mother”) is thought to embody virtue through her suffering (Melhuus 1997: 190), though the underlying logic has been challenged by Mexican feminist writers (Zavella 1997: 392). According to this ideology, a mother who stays with a violent husband is virtuous because she is suffering for the benefit of her children who depend on a father to provide for them (Melhuus 1997: 186). So a woman or man can deploy self-sacrifice discursively as a social currency, with which to position themselves above others morally (Mayblin 2010: 88-93). While Dubisch (1995) argued that narratives of pain and suffering constitute a “poetics of womanhood” through which women construct their gender identity, Milpaltense men also occasionally presented such narratives, which suggests that suffering is not an exclusively feminine virtue. In Magdalena’s narrative, she was the only woman amongst men who appreciated and depended on her, which afforded her a certain level of power over the household, which she initially enjoyed. Yet gradually, her relationship deteriorated over her then-partner’s controlling and violent behaviour:

He didn’t let me go out. So I would say, “I want to see my mom,” and he says he’ll go see his friends. So I say, “No, I’m staying” because I know they’ll get drunk and use drugs... It was really hard not seeing my mom. I couldn’t go anywhere, not even to the market. The house was very big, so I kept busy there with the baby... He was very jealous, very possessive. Since we started dating, he would make people understand, “She’s mine.” One time, a male friend came to see me and he beat him, he flew off the handle. It was an ugly situation. It was a very terrible violence, directed at other men in those days. I was stressed. I was finishing work on my thesis. Then we got into an argument and he tore it into pieces. I had the file on the computer but I had already lost all motivation. I didn’t feel like doing anything. I was crying. And then, when he didn’t like his food: “How is this?!” And he throws it angrily, calling me an idiot (*pendeja*), “What are you doing?!” And then, one of my in-laws takes the baby into another room so he doesn’t have to see this. And my father-in-law tries to calm him. My brother-in-law tries to calm me. I already knew everyone’s position. And everyone says, “How do you stand it, Magda? He’s properly crazy.” Sometimes he scratched me, pushed me, things like that.

Here Magdalena's story fits a very common pattern in intimate partner violence: The perpetrator isolates the victim from their family and friends, even their colleagues, and blackmails them into following their commands (cf. Merry 2009: 6-7). The emotional damage caused Magdalena to give up on her thesis, which she had worked hard for. The story also fits Randall Collins' micro-interactionist model of violence, according to which a fighting couple becomes "entrained" into a violent dynamic, where both are triggered to perform their respective roles as "dominator" and "the weak" (2008: 147). He makes the important distinction that abused women are not essentially weak, but perform weakness: "The woman is playing the victim role all too well, and this is part of the micro-interactional feedback that keeps the dominator entrained in his aggression" (ibid.). Yet frustratingly, Collins does not offer solutions: "It is too simple an answer to advise women in such relationships not to play the victim role. [...] Women who fight back risk escalation to more severe violence; leaving can lead to another kind of escalation [...] to the point of murder" (ibid.). In Magdalena's case, Collins' model would have to be expanded to include bystanders, who were also performing specific roles as mediators and guardians, and therefore assumed a responsibility in the fights. Magdalena also mentioned outsiders' lack of understanding for her situation, effectively blaming her for staying with a "crazy" partner and re-victimising her. Moreover, Magdalena presented herself as a "strong woman," whereas her abuser was the "weak" one, turning Collins' interpretation on its head.

The worst thing he did was give me a blow to the head. Ouch! Never before had anyone given me a *cabezaazo*. More than the physical pain, which is strong, I felt that something inside me broke. My body was like of someone worthless. I couldn't believe he'd done this. I opened my eyes and only saw black from the impact. What's more, I began to feel this strong sensation inside. I wasn't paying attention to what he was yelling because I was focused on what was breaking inside me. It was nothing, but emotionally, this broke many things that I had felt for him. So I said no. [Gravely.] But he went on. It still wasn't over. [Laughs.]

Here, Magdalena is describing her relationship breaking down as an embodied sensation of breakage when her partner hit her head. This internal pain numbed her from the pain

her then-partner sought to inflict on her. Though this was a turning point in the relationship, it was not the end yet, as is often the case in long-term violent relationships:

I would go and he would come looking for me and I would come back. And so, we would play. Because it was a game. Every time I left, he would understand me, for a month or two months. And then he'd be the same again.

The game metaphor is again reminiscent of Collins' interpretation. However, it is important to remember that this is an interpretation of a past self's actions from more than nine years ago, which was influenced by Inmujeres' group therapy sessions.

Anger

Then it occurred to me to check his mobile. And I discovered photos of several girls. Not together with him, he just photographed them and had their phone numbers. I was furious. How terrible! I accepted the blows, bad treatment, ah, but infidelity! This, no! [Laughs.] Now I talk about it laughing, but that day I called the girls. And they're like, "It was nothing. He only asked for my number..." And I'm like, "And when did you see him? And what did you do?" Picking fights with all these girls until he comes home and I tell him what's happening. That night I couldn't sleep. "I left my career, my freedom, to be with you and you do this?! No, no, no. Now it is definitive. I don't want to be with you any longer." This time I was much more decisive. My father-in-law helped me pack. He said, "Ah daughter, I'm truly sorry, we love you (*nosotros te queremos*) very much, we love the child, but it's best for you and for him because living with this man is – in truth, I understand you."

Note that the moment in which Magdalena's relationship ended was a moment in which she herself was exhibiting controlling, jealous behaviour. Contrary to simplistic narratives of domestic violence in pop culture, lines between perpetrator and victim are often blurred. Because of their own acts of violence, which are also often highlighted by their abusive partners, many women express not having thought of themselves as victims (cf. Harris 1994). Note also that fury was what fuelled Magdalena's ability to actually leave that time: While at other times having invested so much into the relationship made her

feel tied to her partner, recalling this now only increased her determination to leave. Thus, her anger had a transformative capacity at this time.

I knew I couldn't keep going back. I had to do something so that people would believe me because at home nobody believed me anymore. And it feels so awful when they don't believe you anymore. So I went to the bank and got a loan and told my mom that I'd build a house. She thought that I was crazy but I went to my cousin who is an architect and asked him to make a plan. He was enthusiastic. Just after leaving him, I went to see Inmujeres. This was my salvation. There I took a course on self-esteem and this helped me to go and make plans for a house and a job and other things. When I went to Inmujeres, we shared many life stories and I became aware of other women, and said, "Oh no!" I was one of the youngest women. I heard other women's life stories who had been with their husbands for 15, 30 years, and who were vaguely thinking about leaving them. I said, no, I don't want that. So I had to reaffirm my decision.

Magdalena had to prove that she was serious about changing her life because those around her had given up on her, refusing to believe that she genuinely wanted to leave her relationship and start a new life. This will ring familiar to many feminist activists, and their international campaigns to "always believe the victim" (Sharpe and Mascia-Lees 1993). Because Inmujeres, as a feminist organisation, follows this maxim, not only believing Magdalena, but helping her to believe and believe in herself, she credits them with nothing less than her "salvation". Her choice of words underscores my earlier point about Inmujeres' "mission" (see Chapter 2). By comparing herself with other women, Magdalena confronted herself with various possible futures, deciding that her future self would not be "the woman who doesn't leave him".

I did it so they would believe me, but that was only part of it. I don't smoke, I don't drink, I don't take drugs, but it felt like an addiction. You can't sleep, you can't be anywhere, you want to be with him, thinking of him... I smelled his clothes... I asked my mom to buy things for me because I knew, I *knew*, if I'd go out, I would run into him. I knew it. It's very difficult to break with this. I don't know if it's an addiction but it was a co-dependency. I gave classes at home. I had students of math, some Physics. I kept busy all the time to be

thinking of productive things and not fail myself (*fracasarme*). And I thought of Benito Juárez, that he could, and I can... [Laughs.] If I hadn't gone to Inmujeres, I would be a very insecure woman, and very scared. My mother was afraid that he and his friends would find me somewhere and take me away because he was like that, very violent. He wasn't afraid of death. He would drive high and drunk, with me and the baby in the car. Those are very high risks. What if we crash? First I blamed him. When I went to Inmujeres I identified that I was co-dependent, that I was responsible for my actions, that I had such a low self-esteem that I had permitted him to attack me verbally, psychologically, that he attacked in me in many ways. I was insecure because I didn't love myself. So I took several of those courses, and then with my work and my son growing, we began to get out of it. Finally, time went by, and I found a job at the municipal government. At first, I earned very little, but it was constant and at least I had that satisfaction.

Magdalena compared her feelings after separating with being on a kind of withdrawal and having to protect herself from being tempted or forced back into the relationship she had left. In this way, she made sense of "co-dependency" and fully subscribed to Inmujeres' terminology. Thus, she uncannily reified the "victim-savage-saviour" triad constructed by international development agencies (Mutua 2001).

One of the things I am grateful for, something nice, is that he had a deep *cariño* and attachment (*apego*) to the child. So the child would see photos of his dad and start crying. ¡Híjole! (Man!) And this, for me, this killed me. And I told my son, "Look, *mijo*, I know you love (*quieres*) your dad very much, but he's far away because you know how he acts and yells." – "Yes, *mamá*." And one time he comes and opens the door by force and fires a shotgun. Then he goes, I was crying and the child sees all this. He was four years old. I remember him taking a tiny chair he had and placing it behind the door. "Don't worry, *mamá*. Nobody is getting in anymore, not my dad. I've already put my chair there." This was one of the most emotional and tough moments but I knew I had to find strength in myself for this child. This is what happened.

A new life

Though most of her story was focused on her childhood (some of which I omitted here) and the relationship with her former partner, the poignant anecdote above captures how the violence directed against her also profoundly affected and co-involved her son. This shows that victimhood often does not simply map onto one person, even if only one person is the intended victim.

My son is twelve years old. He's won various football tournaments. Now he's learning to play the piano. He's doing well in school, he's in the second year of middle school. It's been a lot of work, but I try to give him attention, and time, and quality. My mother educated my son while I was working full time. He is an only grandchild, very spoiled. This makes him very *macho*. Now I'm with him, no. He has to make his bed, wash his dishes. I tell him to help me because he has to. He's in a difficult phase of adolescence. He sees his father once a week when he goes to his grandfather's house to take piano lessons with his uncle. He has seen his father in difficult situations and doesn't want that. I tell him, "Despite this, don't be embarrassed." I'm a tough mom. My mom says to me, "Magda, you're so rough. Poor boy, you're demanding a lot from him." But look at the results. Is it not worth it? But he goes on thinking, my son, that I am the bad one, the ogre. I say to him, "One day you'll thank me. Now you don't understand, but one day, when I won't be on this planet anymore, you're going to notice what you've learned." When he brings his diploma, his qualifications, I say, "Half of it is yours, half of it is mine. Do you disagree? I sit down and explain what you don't understand. I put this time aside for you. Who does this for their children every day?" I check his homework and point out mistakes. In other respects, I'm softer. Parties and so on, I allow him to go and have fun. In life, everything is balance. Not losing one's balance. I tell him not to drink. I tell him, "You already know where the limit is. One of your uncles died as an alcoholic. The other is your father. I am well placed to tell you this because this house has always been in order, not trashed. I have never come home drunk, high, or anything. My example is what counts. You can enjoy yourself but you have to know your limit." [Laughs.]

Throughout her life story, Magdalena presented herself as both a typical Milpaltense woman whose identity is tethered to local practices and ideals of motherhood, order, and balance, while also being an ambitious, educated, and independent woman with pronounced feminist views. Her feminism becomes particularly apparent when she speaks of preventing her son from becoming a *macho* by making him take responsibility in the household, making him aware of her motherly contributions to his success (cf. Ochs 1993), and being strict with him.

It's going to be ten years since we separated. I built my house, bought my car. Right now, I'm unemployed, but before that I was working for the government for nine years. I have achieved so much, not just materially, but spiritually and emotionally. These difficult experiences helped me open up space, because there was a *macho* bubble there, at work. Like, "How is it we have a woman here? Is she capable?" And I think this is what has given me a lot of fortitude, many satisfactions, and respect. And to show that we women are capable, and that we can rise above many adverse situations. And now I've had other partners, but I've not lived with anyone, and I have not allowed anyone to come to my house. I don't want more children. I protect my space and my family. Someday, my son will leave home, and then I will have time to find someone to spend my old age with. But for now, I am happy like this, not being committed to anyone. I don't want to be controlled, "Where are you? What are you doing?" No. I have learnt this lesson well. [Laughs.] I'm also not saying that men are bad. Of course not. Men are wonderful, they are – well, men. [Laughs.] What can we do? They also have their charms. This is my whole story. There are lots of tempestuous stories around here.

Thus, Magdalena ended her story on a note of personal success, having built a new life and asserted herself against sexist colleagues. She also strikes a conciliatory tone by highlighting that men are not her enemies, but loveable and deserving of love (cf. hooks 2000). This may be to distance herself from the image of feminists as man-haters in Milpa Alta. She closed by noting that her story is not unusual, but that domestic violence is common.

Contesting love

In sum, Magdalena's life story displayed a trajectory towards increasing self-love and independence. Once famished for love, she no longer depends on a partner to fill that void in her life because she has found love within herself. While participating in artistic contests as a child and her university degree show that ambition has been central to her sense of self from the start, and her contemplation of abortion also reflects an early sense of entitlement to women's rights, her initial concept of love led her to accept the limitations of a more conventional lifestyle, living patrilocally as a mother and homemaker, as well as enduring her partner's addictions and violence. Through Inmujeres' influence, she came to categorise this behaviour as "co-dependence" and claimed responsibility for her own life conditions and happiness.

Magdalena's story thus constitutes an individualising *responsibilisation* narrative: "responsibilised" individuals will consider their wellbeing and social problems, such as violence and poverty, as their own responsibility, rather than the state's (Lemke 2001: 201-203). For Magdalena, rejecting victimhood and claiming responsibility for her situation was attractive, because it meant overcoming feelings of impotence in the face of stronger adversaries (Janoff-Bulman 1979) or of an unresponsive, effectively lawless state (Butler 2004: 54-56). Yet by highlighting her independence and focusing her hardship on herself, she obscured the possibility of holding her ex-partner accountable for his actions.

Notably, Magdalena cast her transformed sense of self and self-responsibility as a question of coming to correct her "misunderstandings" about love. Inmujeres taught her to reject the elusive traditional ideal of companionate marriage. By contrast, her Nahuatl-speaking great aunt located love in the couple's shared work and having children, understanding love as ongoing action, rather than an internal feeling, as in Inmujeres' definition of self-love. As "discontent with current gender relations has found expression in self-help discourses that tend to focus on physical abuse and co-dependency" (Sharpe and Mascia-Lees 1993: 91), in part because organisations like Inmujeres have few resources at their disposal, Milpaltense Nahuatl-speakers' and elders' ideal of self-sacrificing love comes to be rebranded as pathological co-dependency. Therefore, by emphasising the need to understand love correctly, Magdalena succinctly articulated not only the continued central importance of love to Milpaltense sociality, but also its contested nature in the context of competing cosmologies of gender and violence, which

may co-exist within one family, as in her own case. As a weaver and feminist, Magdalena variously celebrated and criticised aspects of Milpaltense culture. It would thus be inadequate to simplistically label her as a victim of “cultural violence.” To avoid overgeneralising from one example, I will now turn to what other Milpaltenses had to say about notions of interdependent love and self-love.

TWO KINDS OF LOVE

Interdependent love

In the Introduction, I described the culturally conservative 64-year-old, Leona’s, understanding of gender complementarity as a joint struggle in the face of adversity. As I have observed first hand, during most wedding celebrations, the *padrinos de la velación* (“godparents of the candle-lit vigil”) give advice to the bride and bridegroom, often reminding the groom to be “*honrado*” (honourable) and “*trabajador*” (hard-working), making sure that his wife always has what she needs by providing for her and being faithful to her. The Nahuatl-speaking *campesino* (tenant farmer) husband of Socorro’s eldest sister told me that the bride is told that she should no longer “*perder tiempo con sus amigas*” (lose time with her friends), and should forget about her “*amistades de la calle*” (friendships of the street; or any friendships, for that matter) but instead devote herself to her new responsibilities. Ideally, men, too, should leave their friendships behind. Even if the wife works outside the home, she should still make sure that she has food ready for her husband when he comes home from work and provide him with clean clothing.

While the strictly gendered work patterns described by Leona and Socorro’s brother-in-law have become increasingly uncommon among younger Milpaltenses, the couples I knew found creative ways of embodying ideal companionship: For example, the middle-aged musician Don Pablo and his saleswoman wife, Rita, sang in the church choir together, and spoke of each other with appreciation and respect, despite or perhaps because of having been through a lot together. Most days, Rita commuted to her market stall in Mexico City centre for two or three hours in each direction. When she returned home in the dark of the night, he would stand at the bus stop waiting for her to ensure her safe passage home. As Rita joked, she could rely on her husband standing there

without fail, even if he was too drunk to stand straight, by which she alluded to his alcoholism. Don Pablo rarely showed up to choir rehearsals if Rita was not there to motivate him. Similarly, the adorable newlyweds Paco and Libertad worked at a pizza joint together and seemed inseparable – so much so, that Libertad was known as “Paquita”. The *tlacuateras*’ leader, Amparo, always had her husband, who was also a distant relative, by her side. Leona described the interdependency of spouses as something which is gradually achieved and maintained through hard work and mutual sacrifices:

Our partner, our husband, is totally independent of us, he did not grow up like us in his home. And it’s very difficult to make them change their minds. [...] But they do change. Because I can see that you can succeed, when the woman wills it. [...] I went back to tell my husband, “Tell me how I’m failing you. How am I failing? Did you want a girlfriend? Yes, I was that. Did you want a wife? Yes, I am that. Do you want a lady friend? I already told you that I do not like it. Do you want me to be your lover? Tell me how to be.” And he says, “And you, who are you seeing? Why are you asking me?” And me, “I’m not looking for a way to convince you or make me understand or whatever. Because I already went through that. What role am I going to play right now, what have you left me? Will my children be abandoned? In what way am I failing? I wash, I iron, I go to work, I go to sell, I watch my children, I wait for you, I make my home – what else? When I ask you for a room, I want you to paint it, I want you to do it, because I help you, I’m not denying myself.” Afterwards, maybe he would get angry or he wanted to leave. [...] Then he told me, “You’re right. We’re going to buy this tomorrow.” As a mother, I had to raise my children, and as a wife, I had to work with him. And working, we forgot the fight. I think that is very important.

So Leona had to remind her husband of the sacrifices she had made for her family and what he owed her to prevent him from leaving her and the children. Illustrating her earlier view of love as work and work as love, they literally worked through and overcame their marital difficulties by working together. Many older interviewees would highlight their ability to overcome marital difficulties, including violent behaviour, by learning to relate to one another empathetically. The librarian Roberto expressed this in terms of a mutual

domestication process, others employed the idiom of “*entenderse*” (understand one another) and “*acostumbrarse*” (getting used to one another).

One evening, while sipping herbal tea and munching *cocolos* (anise buns) at Socorro’s table, Estrella told me that her husband Sergio was violent and uncaring at the beginning of their relationship and marriage. When Estrella first met Sergio, he got her pregnant and went to work in the north of the country, leaving her abandoned. When her father found out about her condition, he beat her and told her to leave, so she moved in with her sister, where she did the housework and looked after her sister’s children. But Estrella’s sister mistreated her and she never received any money for the work. After five years, Sergio returned and got her pregnant yet again. When her sister found out, she kicked Estrella out and she went back to her parents’ home, but her father beat her and told her not to come back. She pleaded with her mother who said she would find a space for her. Yet her mother was very submissive towards her father and unable to put her foot down, so young Estrella stayed but continued receiving beatings from her father. Eventually, she talked things through with Sergio and he accepted responsibility for his children. Yet the problems did not stop there. Estrella said that Sergio was hot-headed in those days, so they would fight a lot and if he did not like a dress she was wearing, he tore it apart.

I was shocked to hear this, as I would have never suspected that things began like this for Estrella. Sergio had always seemed like an exceptionally kind and helpful husband to me. Could a selfish hothead have transformed so radically? Estrella said that it was a process, but she eventually succeeded in making him “understand” her, which she described as letting him see things from her perspective, but also as developing a physical understanding of her suffering. This embodied sense of empathy, which he gradually developed for her, transformed their relationship completely. And by working hard together, they managed to make a beautiful home, full of the colourful ceramic decorations that Estrella loves. The morale of Estrella’s story is that love needs empathy to flourish, and a couple needs love to be productive.

Other marriages seemed to be not so much interdependent, as co-dependent, in Inmujeres’ sense. Particularly older women would either minimise past violent conduct of their husbands or adopt a defiant tone, particularly when divorced or separated from their spouses. The middle-aged politician Carmen took it upon herself to forbid her

mother from letting her drunken, violent father back into the house after he had already shot at their front door, which still displays the holes of evidence. In the upshot, there was a marked generational difference in relative acceptance of disrespect and beatings on the side of one's partner, with acceptance decreasing in the younger generation. Nonetheless, younger people's statements gave the impression that the occurrence of violence had not diminished significantly despite gradually shifting attitudes. In other words, while the meanings and levels of acceptance of violence appeared to have changed, the frequency of its occurrence had not.

Across social categories, interviewees would, more often than not, narrate their experience of love in terms of the failed realisation of a high ideal. Among other examples, the shaman's apprentice Soledad spoke of her husband in the highest terms, but declared confidently that she had yet to encounter her "cosmic love". The librarian Roberto confessed that his wife's "coldness" had led him to have an affair. The widowed shopkeeper Rocio explained that she pragmatically chose to marry an older second husband because he would be more likely to treat her well. Most starkly, Socorro said that a number of broken-hearted men have hung themselves from bridges, while some unloved women have killed themselves with rat poison or opened their veins, choosing a more private death. Socorro and other women have described these suicides as being motivated by a feeling of worthlessness after the partner's rejection. The last suicide was committed about two years ago. Before that, there had been a phase in which more than ten people killed themselves within less than three years. Socorro highlighted depression as a motive, but added that this was also about publicly accusing and brandishing the adulterers for life: "Imagine living with that guilt for the rest of your life."

As Taggart (2007) argues, *tlazobtlaliztli* -love is also the basis of Nahua morality and social reproduction in general. This, in conjunction with the exaltation of love in Mexican pop culture as well as Catholicism, may explain why many Milpaltenses seem exceptionally willing to do anything for *amor* and have trouble dealing with *desamor* (falling out of love), to the extent of triggering a suicide fad. "Affective individualism" (Stone 1990), or rather, the selfishness of modern love, and its extreme manifestation in machismo, in this sense is not simply perceived as a gendered threat to women, but to the very fabric and reproduction of society (cf. Abu-Lughod 1999).

Self-love

Only women spoke of lacking self-love, whereas men were often viewed as loving selfishly. Yet speaking to men gave the impression that one might lead to the other. For instance, the charming 20-year-old assistant cook Emiliano admitted that he had been on a self-destructive path until recently, and had many scars, real and figurative, to prove it. He descended from a series of violent womanisers, with his grandfather having been murdered as a suspected sorcerer-*nabual* and adulterer, and his father being a hypermasculine, wife-beating, gun-toting cop who fathered nine children with four women, Emiliano's mother having been the first wife, the current wife being little older than Emiliano. He used to frequently fly off the handle, use drugs, and was even expelled from the first middle school he attended, but was luckily accepted at one where his mother worked as a cook. His greatest regret was having gotten a girl pregnant in his teens, who had an abortion after he decided he felt unable to live in her parents' house with her. While he was deeply fascinated with romance and dreamed of becoming a veterinarian, companionate, self-sacrificing drudgery and studying hard for the university entrance exam held little appeal for him. When a family member angers him, he said he locks himself into his room to prevent an escalation. His mode of self-care was to play on his guitar for himself, often driving his family crazy as his captive audience. He said music and his friends helped him to be more relaxed and take control of his emotions. When he recited several romantic poems to Socorro and me with his warm voice, he showed a preference for performing a man's suffering for love, which he likened to having a taste for chilli: a kind of suffering that gives pleasure – my formulation, but one he agreed with.

Like interdependent love, self-love was often hard-won, in light of experienced discrimination and violence. Some women reclaimed feeling beautiful against what they experienced as a widespread preference for Northern European phenotypes (cf. Moreno 2013). Soledad said that joining the shaman's group radically changed her life from being in a constant state of anxiety (*angustia*), being very organised, and disregarding her needs, as well as rejecting her Indigenous looks, to letting go of it all. Before, she had dyed her hair red, wore make-up and high heels, now she opted for a natural and more comfortable, less sexualized look. The richly tanned skin she once resented, she now treasures. Some members of the cultural revitalization group *Mujeres de Piel Color de la Tierra* (Women of earth-coloured skin) in the Milpaltense pueblo of San Pablo Oztotepec similarly expressed

that they were proud of their brown skin colour because it marked them as belonging to the land. Some of the women expressing these vernacularised notions of self-love and brown beauty, pitied the often lighter-skinned women of San Juan Ixtayopan as the product of their female ancestors' rape.

Other Milpaltense women were willing to take considerable risks to feel beautiful by taking Herbalife, a popular, slim-fast product from the US, sold internationally, including at many pharmacies and shops in the Milpa Alta area. Despite stories of Herbalife products' allegedly nefarious effects circulating widely in Milpa Alta, and their costliness, they continue to be sold and consumed. Socorro says her estranged, obese *comadre* Ana had been an avid customer of Herbalife protein shakes, but did not seem to have lost weight. Estrella related how a Herbalife seller constantly hassled her to try his products until she finally told him frankly that she was uninterested because she had heard a woman in San Gregorio died from using Herbalife. The seller did not bother her again. Delia said she had tried Herbalife twice but quit because her sister's head became swollen from it. Globalised beauty standards and the lack of political will to protect consumers against potentially hazardous products collude in devaluing and putting non-white women's bodies at risk, preying on women's aspirations to become beautiful moderns (cf. Edmonds 2010).

Thus, it was one thing for women to "love themselves" if they conformed to hyperfeminine "glocal" beauty ideals. Women put themselves at risk of social ostracism when they did not fulfil gender expectations. In my 15 months of fieldwork, I never met a self-identifying lesbian, though there were some examples of quietly gender-fluid individuals, such as the feisty 60-year-old diabetic Delia, who resisted her peers' repeated calls to feminise her "unbecoming" appearance with make-up, hair styling, and skirt-wearing. As an unmarried woman, Delia remained the mistress of her own image, albeit at the cost of living precariously in a small, Spartan home with bare walls.

Several of the *tlacualeras* described having experienced domestic violence – some were divorced, others widowed. Others were married, but only few happily so. The wealthy Eduviges, who claims Spanish ancestry, had taken her husband back, after he had left her for a lover for several years. It was not uncommon for women to forgive husbands in such situations – in Milpaltense women's discourse, a husband's life-long fidelity was

treated like a fortunate exception for a lucky few. However, allowing a husband to return under these circumstances earned women the pejorative epithet, “*pendeja*” (idiot, coward).



FIGURE 21: SWEET 15 PROCESSION AS CELEBRATION OF CONVENTIONAL *MESTIZA* FEMININE BEAUTY

Men were expected to be philandering and unmarried single mothers were considered to be potential rivals by women, and immoral temptresses by many members of both genders, referred to as “*cabronas*” (bitches). At one *tlacuáleras* meeting, Eduviges dryly remarked, “*ya vinieron las cabronas*” (the bitches have arrived) when she saw two divorced members enter, at which one replied, “*mejor cabrona que pendeja*” (better a bitch, than a coward). The other told me that she started living with her husband when she was 16 years old and put up with his bad treatment for a long time. Now that they are divorced, she claimed he had come to regret his choices, while she enjoys her freedom. She received a regular pension (but nothing from him) and said, cheekily, that she uses the money to entertain young lovers. And if her ex protests, she tells him that she learnt this from him. “I am no longer the same woman I was,” she asserted. She had an arrangement with her husband that he should visit her every two months, but he has not complied. He recently showed up, asking her to make *mole* for him. She refused, citing too many appointments. When she did offer him something to eat, it was leftovers – since he remarried, she feels

no responsibility to feed him, though some other divorced women do receive their exes in this polite manner. In short, leaving an abusive husband was no silver bullet for most Milpaltense women, as women commonly had to continue spending time with their exes, and not doing so added to the negative image associated with divorced or separated, and thus “conflictive” (*conflictivas*), women.

SACRIFICING (FOR) LOVE

Contrary to Magdalena’s assertion that Milpaltenses “misunderstand” love, it appears that whatever understanding of love they choose, they are caught in a dilemma. Notably, it was only women who spoke of having to love themselves, which suggests that women were perceived as needier of love, or that their value, unlike men’s, depended on being loved as external validation – though, in practice, men also appeared needy of love. In any case, Inmujeres’ and other vernacularised notions of self-love cannot work when expectations for women to self-sacrifice for their families are overwhelming. To escape such expectations, women like Magdalena find themselves having to start a new life, independent of partners or their families, which often involves other kinds of sacrifices. Similarly, the more conventional notion of interdependent love cannot work when one spouse bails on what is considered their duty, such as when wives refuse to have sex, or husbands are philandering. Is sacrifice inescapable for Milpaltense women?

Sacrifice is an inherently perspectival concept in anthropology: Typically, it is considered to have a tri-partite structure, taking place between sacrificer, sacrificial victim, and recipient; yet often, the victim’s subjecthood is de-emphasised to make sacrifice appear as a direct “gift” from devotees to their entity of worship, rather than violence (Mayblin and Course 2014). From other perspectives, sacrifice may appear as nothing other than violence dressed up as cosmic order, whether that violence is directed at someone else, or against oneself (*ibid.*). We can find this logic mirrored in Milpaltense understandings of love: In interdependent love, reciprocal obligation is highlighted, whereas in Inmujeres’ view those “gifts” are violence. Conversely, the sacrifices that enable self-love seem invisible to Inmujeres, but are obvious to traditionalist women like Leona: “Today marriages are disposable like nappies (*desechables como los panales*). Why? Because they use them and toss them”.



FIGURE 22: GOOD FRIDAY PROCESSION RE-ENACTING THE PASSION OF CHRIST

Thus, notions of love and violence are closely linked to sacrifice and victimhood in Milpa Alta. Yet confusion arises from all of these categories being deeply contested. Importantly, the Milpaltense women I knew never spoke of victimhood in the first person present: Either they spoke of a past version of themselves, marked by phrases, such as “I was a [certain kind of] woman then”, or they spoke of a third party’s victimhood. This also occurred in characterising what women in other pueblos and the marriage patterns there were like.

“Women don’t know it’s abuse”

My friend Yolotl, a keen observer of her pueblo, told me, “there’s another form of abuse that they wouldn’t have spoken to you about because women don’t know it’s abuse.” She was messaging me about what might be termed “patrimonial violence”, one of the six types of violence Inmujeres is tasked with extirpating, but which are not widely acknowledged in Milpa Alta (see Chapter 2):

When my mother got married, her parents gave her land and a house, all under the name of her husband. She wasn’t important, the husband was –

this makes my stomach ache. This means placing the woman into a situation of risk and forcing her to stay married, not just for the children and the shame but also the patrimony and her parents' work are at risk. Nobody thinks badly of this, not even my mother thinks badly of it – picture that.

The dominant gender ideology surrounding the economy of love in Villa Milpa Alta indeed encourages women to live in financial dependence of their husbands: Men normally have an income, whereas women often do non-monetised work, but survey the family finances (cf. Adapon 2008). Furthermore, the asymmetry of gender privilege systematically limits their choices. For instance, a woman does not have the right to decide whether her husband gets a job, but he may forbid her to seek employment. Yolotl continued:

My father gave all the inheritance to my brother because he is male and has male sons. I, as I haven't married and won't have children, it seems, don't have an equal share of the inheritance, if he will give me something, it will be less. I feel abused and I told him, I confronted him and he doesn't understand – it's a delicate matter. There are stories of inheritance that can only come into effect when a daughter gets married. My mother has a neighbour in Milpa Alta whom she calls "the maiden". I'm talking about a 70-year-old woman ... This "maiden" lives in one of the grand old houses in Milpa Alta which she inherited from her parents and which her cousins want to take away from her, my mother said that she would go to a lawyer and help her with this, but it turns out the will states that the house will belong to her once she gets married. The woman, it seems, cannot be the owner of the land, it's the husband who has to be the owner, even if she's working and administrating it. [... P]arents don't give their daughters an equal share of the inheritance because they assume that the husband's family will provide inheritance for them. People used to have a lot of honour and pride, and I understand that they took it for granted that if their daughter got married with a man from the pueblo, her future would be secured.

I brought the subject up with various friends and acquaintances to confirm Yolotl's account. In Villa Milpa Alta, normally only older brothers inherit land. Interestingly, this patrilineal inheritance pattern is not the same in Tlacotenco, where both daughter and son

inherit from their parents: sons from their fathers, daughters from their mothers. What is curious about this is that Villa Milpaltenses often say that Tlacotenco is a more “traditional” community than Villa and that, for this reason, women there are more “repressed”.

When I related this claim to Socorro, she said defiantly: “So they say Santaneras are more repressed - but they’re wrong!” She explained that Tlacotencans know that a woman needs to be able to defend herself (*defenderse, no dejarse*) and not depend on a man for her living. Tlacotencan women have been merchants for generations. If a husband does not bring food home, a Tlacotencan woman is not going to sit with her arms crossed, she will get up and make whatever money she needs, even if it simply means going to the field, picking some herbs, and selling them. They will find something to sell, and will come home having sold the whole lot. And because women make their own money, they pass their inheritance down separately. Socorro herself has worked as a buyer and seller. Her young friend, the single mother Sara, even though her ex-partner refuses to support her financially, has been able to survive by relying on female networks for interest-free loans and emotional support. So female-female solidarity is also a noteworthy factor in women’s relative independence. In other cases, women turn to their natal families for support. Socorro does not deny that there is plenty of wife-beating in Tlacotenco, although she opines that claims about its frequency have been exaggerated.

These conversations with Yolotl and Socorro exemplify how both women from Villa Milpa Alta and Santa Ana Tlacotenco regard each other as victims of violence, but differ in what they regard as violence, so that neither self-identify as victims. Both Villa Milpaltense and Tlacotense women are hard workers, but Villa Milpaltense women’s work (both in homes and family businesses) is largely invisible to their husbands, meaning that men maintain a self-image of being the principle bread-winners of the family. As many Villa Milpaltenses live as *nopal*-growing *campesinos*, parents avoid splitting the land up by limiting inheritance to those who are most likely to take care of it: their oldest male sons. Villa Milpaltense women are also less likely to work outside the home, so that men are more likely to feel in control over them, whereas Tlacotencan women’s activities as merchants give more rise to jealousy and physical fights between spouses. A male Villa Milpaltense friend opined that machismo tends to be less of a problem in poorer families, as the wife will be more likely to earn a second income for the family and be recognised

for that. Notably, low income families are also more likely to be culturally conservative – a trend that has been observed for over a hundred years (Ramírez 1912).

In many cases, the differences between the pueblos are blurred even more, when families do not adhere to the dominant inheritance pattern for various reasons, such as when two widowed people marry and already had children from their previous marriages, as was the case for the shopkeeper Rocio and her husband. When a family does not own any land, sons are more likely to look for work in the US, in some cases risking the dangerous illegal journey, causing a lot of emotional strain on their families, even when it worked out well for them. Furthermore, denying inheritance to one's child was a common punishment, for example, when they married someone against their parents' will. Conversely, children may demand to receive their inheritance before their parents' death, sometimes even forcing their parents out of their homes. As the rapidly growing population of Milpa Alta is hungry for land, inheritance is felt strongly about and has been a prime motive for homicide in the Milpa Alta area, with approximately one such case being reported every year.

The question of agency

The frankness and ironic distance with which Milpaltenses spoke of their past experiences shows that “violence means neither one moment of violation nor a lifetime as a pariah” (Mookherjee 2015: 251). Too often, anthropologists retreat into poetic, or reflexive, language when writing about the experience of violence – or absolve themselves from writing about it altogether. Milpaltense life stories suggest contextualising suffering within a life full of other, often joyful, experiences instead. Moreover, the examples in this chapter show that neither romantic love, nor the risk of enduring violence associated with it, were perceived as things passively befalling Milpaltenses. Both Leona and Magdalena described love, whether self- or other-directed, as growing from continuously working towards it with the support of others, whether those are family members in Leona's case, or Inmujeres' workers in Magdalena's case. Similarly, Leona was not simply forced into submission, but chose this path for herself (cf. Mahmood 2005), whereas Magdalena described her co-responsibility for playing the “game” of violence with her ex-partner (cf. Collins 2008). As High (2015) has shown for Waorani people in Amazonian Ecuador,

victimhood is often actively produced in oneself and others, underscoring the agency of victims.

And yet, Milpaltenses commonly associated the term “victim” with passivity and therefore refused to apply it to themselves, even when they spoke of having experienced violence in their lives. In part, this may be explained by the negative associations of victimhood described in the previous chapter. However, considering the association of love with sacrifice, which was particularly strong among Nahuatl-speakers, reveals another layer of meaning regarding the rejection of victimhood: Rather than see themselves as victims, women seeking to follow the ideal of interdependent love perceive themselves as being in a reciprocal exchange with their husbands, so that what may appear as “self-sacrifice” may be leveraged against their husbands, if the latter fail to uphold their side of the exchange. Introducing notions of “victimhood” may thus be seen to endanger this model of reciprocal obligation in marriage. How this reciprocal arrangement is configured, varies across Milpaltense pueblos. Women who feel failed by gender complementarity, may instead turn to loving, which is to say, working for, themselves. In their narratives, the victim is their past self, or women of neighbouring pueblos, cast as being stuck in the past. They have sacrificed this victim to embrace a new, modernist image of love.

These competing logics of love and sacrifice lie dangerously close to each other, giving rise to frictions between those adhering to one model and those following others. Nobody wants to be a victim, and nobody seems to perceive themselves as such, and yet, talk of victimhood is everywhere. Much as Gell (2011) observed, here, too, the risks of love are closely tied to how knowledge about it is managed – being exposed as a victim is itself experienced as a form of violence. But in the same way as Milpaltenses do not typically regard themselves as being helplessly in love, they are also not passive victims of knowledge. The circulation of alternative concepts of love presents Milpaltenses with a choice of how and what to love. Moreover, knowledge not only lies in concepts, but also in one’s embodied affects. In Magdalena’s case, the cathartic flame of righteous anger catalysed her transition from one understanding of love and violence to another.

Love itself has agency, most palpably in the crisis moment of falling in love – a liminal state rife with creative-destructive tension. Like a trickster, love and violence are as two sides of one characterless, yet powerful agent of change. *Pave* Whitehead (2004b),

it does not carry meaning in itself, but is at once instrumental to the obliteration of meaning and subject to fervent meaning-making. Through women's narratives of violence, once again, we return to "the fundamental problematicity of violence" (Dodd 2009: 153).

CONCLUSIONS

Anthropologists have long been aware of deep links between love and power, particularly in postcolonial contexts, where conquest was inscribed on women's bodies. For many Milpaltenses, like many other Latin American peoples, love was essential to their personal and communal lives, assuming an almost *mana*-like quality. Yet like power in general, love was ambivalent and potentially dangerous: Many of my interlocutors spoke about having experienced both romantic bliss and painful violence in their marriages. Moreover, both love and violence were considered to have transformative qualities, changing not only the nature of a relationship, but changing people's relationship to themselves, their bodies, and their social network.

A particular danger arose in the simultaneous circulation of different, competing concepts of love, linked to different understandings and aspirations surrounding marriage and women's work. Broadly speaking, ideas of love can be divided into the interdependent model of love associated with "traditional" gender complementarity and independent self-love associated with "modern" individualism. Both categories of love are heterogeneous within themselves, as interdependence takes on new forms with changes in couple's divisions of work, and Inmujeres' concept of self-love has been vernacularized.

Connected to these different concepts of love were different understandings of victimhood, which was generally considered a pejorative notion. More conservative women perceived divorcees as selfish sacrificers of their families' fortunes, leaving their children as victims. Others maintained that women who remained in a violent marriage were making victims of themselves. In addition, I have described that self-love can be an elusive goal for those who are constantly reminded that they are undesirable by common standards. Therefore, ideas about "healthy" love and "bad" victimhood were perspectival, varying with women's diverse and dynamic subjectivities. In sum, we are presented with

a conceptual “battlefield” of love. Inmujeres’ promotion of self-love as a solution to intimate partner violence conflicted with local ideas of love as mutual sacrifice and ignored crucial differences between women, which make self-love more attainable for some than for others.

6. Feasts of Loving Violence

*[F]or love is strong as death,
passion fierce as the grave.
Its flashes are flashes of fire,
a raging flame.*

Song of Songs 8:6

Red, white, and green flames whirl, whizz high above our heads, in circles atop the *castillos*, tall metal towers, set up solely for this purpose, revealing fantastical shapes, titillating the revellers' imagination and aspirations, including Our Lady of Guadalupe, a turkey morphing into a mole dish, and a magnificent T-Rex of fire, while rockets shoot across the sky bursting into glorious, glimmering, golden stars, shining brightly against the darkness, engulfing the captivated crowd in numbing noise and intoxicatingly thick smoke, filling my lungs and nose, and my heart - sparkling, blazing, exploding! In a flash, all is gone. Words fail to describe the wonder, the giddiness, the sheer joy I felt watching the elaborate firework display at the patronal feast of Santa Ana, which lasted for an hour and a half, marking the climax of the year's communal celebrations. Arriving home, still riding that high and feeling uncommonly energised by it, I threw myself on the couch and declared: "I love Santa Ana!" Socorro was pleased. She thought I meant I was mystically enraptured with Tlacotenco's patronal saint, Lady St. Anne, the mother of the Virgin Mary, and over the next days, went on to tell her friends about it in the manner of a mother boasting about her infant's first smile. I dared not correct her impression. For her, this was a sign that I was becoming a true Tlacotecan. Yet to say that Socorro misunderstood me, is itself an "equivocation" (Viveiros de Castro 2004): From her perspective, St. Anne, the pueblo, and us two were as one, linked by the transformative fire of love, so powerfully performed in Milpaltense feasts and their fireworks.

"Somos bien fiesteros - we are party animals," my friends would often say about their people, with pride and embarrassment in equal measure, knowing that outsiders consider them to

be somewhat excessive in this respect. Festivities have often been described as one of the definitive features of Milpa Alta: No less than 700 public festivals of Christian and Aztec tradition are celebrated by the 116,000 people of this municipality every year, including celebrations of patron saints, seed planting and harvesting, political and religious feasts (cf. Wachter 2006: 35). In addition, birthdays, weddings, and other life cycle events may involve dozens, even hundreds of people. Hospitality commands that you can walk into any party and be fed – thus, in theory, nobody in Milpa Alta needs to suffer hunger or loneliness. Feasts even mark the buying of vehicles, such as a motorcycles: vehicles of both physical and social mobility. And so the Priest blesses motorcycles and babies alike with incense and the sprinkling of Holy Water. What drives all this fervent merry-making? I will argue that, while each feast is different and may be motivated by a specific set of hopes, concerns, as well as social, political, and historical references, as a whole, Milpaltense feasts celebrate love, and are thus haunted by the troubles of love.

According to Reddy, “normative emotions and the official ritual, practices and emotives that express and inculcate them [constitute] a necessary underpinning of any stable political regime” (2001: 129). Similarly, Milpaltenses’ constant celebration of love has political effects. As feasts promote the shared values of generosity, hospitality, and love, and rely on an equal, sexual division of labour, they are spectacular performances of gender complementarity and social interdependence, contrasting with unequal workloads and complicated relationships in the everyday. However, a closer analysis reveals that feasts rely on gendered and other forms of exploitation and social exclusion. Thus, feasts contain within them the same dynamics and contradictions we see in the conjugal relationship, including joy, beauty, creativity, mutual self-sacrifice – and the potential for violence.

As an analytical concept in anthropology, “sacrifice” is a universalising term; however, it would be impossible to reduce the diverse set of secular and religious phenomena subsumed under it to a unitary identity (cf. Mayblin and Course 2014: 308). The giving of uninterested, apparently “selfless” labour, or of the fruits of such labour, may be understood as a type of “sacrifice” in Milpa Alta. Yet it is necessary to distinguish how Milpaltenses themselves employ the word “*sacrificio*”. We can get a sense of how much the meanings of sacrifice vary through the three kinds of sacrifice that appear in the present and in previous chapters: the religious sacrifice of labour, money, animals, and

goods in festivities, such as the Feast of St. Anne; the revolutionary warrior-like readiness to sacrifice one's life in armed conflict to protect the pueblo and its sacred forest and waters from capitalist exploitation; and married couples', particularly mothers', everyday self-sacrifice through hard work and suffering (cf. Mayblin 2014). So "*sacrificio*" is an intricately interwoven and fuzzy concept, representing the continuously shifting kaleidoscope of encounters between Aztec philosophy, Abrahamic texts, Revolutionary-Zapatista ideology, and Hispanic and Nahua gender ideology.

In the following, I will situate my focus on love within the ethnography of Mexican feasts, before I turn to my main example of the spectacular Lord of Chalma feasts as well as the gendered sacrifices within these. From this, I will conclude that while feasts highlight gender complementarity in the spirit of love, they invisibilise asymmetrical gendered sacrifices in the everyday.



FIGURE 23: TLACOTALPAN MEN BUILDING CASTILLOS (FIREWORK TOWERS) FOR THE FEAST OF ST. ANNE

Returning affect to Highland Mexican feasts

Similar to other parts of Latin America, religious festivities in Milpa Alta are organised by so-called *mayordomos*, who are the unpaid heads of a hierarchical team of volunteers, usually recruited from their kinsfolk and neighbours. With few exceptions, *mayordomos* take responsibility for their *cargo* (load) for one year. What is unusual about Milpa Alta's *mayordomías*, these cargo systems, as opposed to some other rural Mexican communities, is that men and women are considered equally important to the organisation of a fiesta. So the *cargo* of *mayordomo* is not only conferred to a man, but to husband and wife⁵², who are already bound together by a bond of love and mutual obligation to each other. It is therefore worth looking at the symbolic emphasis on love and gender symmetry in Milpaltense *mayordomías* and their effects in more detail.

In highlighting love, I am departing from the ample body of previous ethnographies on *mayordomía* feasts in Mexico, which I will only review briefly for reasons of space. Broadly, these ethnographies might be divided into two phases: a focus on structure between the 1950s and 80s, followed by a focus on agency (Magazine 2011: 40-44). Many of the earlier studies were influenced by Wolf's (1955) notion of the closed corporate peasant community, according to which a religious cargo system was established in highland Mexico by the Spanish during the colonial period, after which the communities themselves continued to maintain this system as a boundary-making practice to protect the community from external cultural and economic influences. Thus, many studies argued that *mayordomía* feasts produce community and social stratification, or hierarchies (Cancian 1965; DeWalt 1975; Greenberg 1981). While continuing to affirm the production of community, the shift to agency has led to a de-emphasis of hierarchy, instead highlighting economic redistribution, shared work, and togetherness (Cohen 1999; Good 2004; Millan 2005; Monaghan 1990). Yet my Milpaltense interlocutors did not speak much of "capitalism" and never of "gift economy" or "solidarity economics" – and the distinctions between these categories do not hold up ethnographically (cf. James 2014) – but instead most only indirectly engaged with different economic visions through their deep concern with issues of reproduction, morality, and aesthetics.

⁵² More rarely, brother and sister, or son and mother may take on the role of *mayordomos*, as in the case of Tlacotenco's priest, who acted as *mayordomo* of the pilgrimage to the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe with the support of his mother.

Reflecting a wider disciplinary turn towards intersubjectivity (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992: 10), Magazine's (2011) point that *mayordomías* do not produce community, as community is already a given, marks a significant intervention in this body of literature. He instead argues that what really matters to the participants in *mayordomías* is the enactment of interdependence: the community is only able to produce a good feast if it is produced *entre todos* (between the whole community). This sentiment is captured by the phrase "the village is like a wheel", meaning that the main helpers (*compañeros*) "are like the spokes and the other villagers the outer rim. Everyone is there and ready to cooperate, but they need the *mayordomo* to get things started by pushing the wheel so it starts moving" (ibid.: 49). Expanding Magazine's discussion, I argue that when villagers cooperate *con gusto*, they are not just active subjects, but also *feeling* subjects: When hardworking *mayordomos* and their helpers gain *reconocimiento* (recognition) in a pueblo, they are not just accruing social credit and prestige on the basis of their actions, but also love.

Recent work by two of the most eminent fieldworkers of Nahua communities, Taggart (2007, 2015) and Good (2005, 2015) supports paying greater attention to sensuousness and particularly to loving, or *tlazobhtlaliztli* in Nahuatl, as an organising principle of social life. "For the people of Alto Balsas, Guerrero, social relations emerge from the circulation of work, or *tequitl*, via the flow of force (*fuertza*), or *chicabualiztli*, and from the reciprocity meant as an action of love and/or respect" (Good 2015: 137, my translation from Spanish). Good highlights that love and respect "cannot exist as abstract emotions and sensations, they have to manifest themselves in the constant exchange of work and goods" (ibid.: 139). In the Sierra Norte of Puebla, love is expressed by working for each other, and encompasses other emotions, such as desire and gratitude, which are considered to "emerge in any relationship in which there is gift exchange" (2015: 190, my translation). Given that Milpaltense relations with the saints and other nonhuman beings are equally characterised by constant exchanges, it follows that love is also central to these relationships. Devotees care lovingly for saints' images and in turn receive their blessing for planting and harvesting.

This growing literature on Nahua work, including feast preparations, as love has so far paid comparatively little attention to the dangerous side of love, which I discussed in the previous chapter and will expand in the current one. Taggart mentioned that the cooperative and communal values of his interlocutors "require management of emotions

in accordance with a moral discourse which promotes the value of working for each other and not comporting oneself with envy”, yet they expressed that where there is love, there is also, inevitably, envy (ibid.). Combining Good’s, Taggart’s and Magazine’s insights, love requires the constant affirmation or “activation” of interdependence, whereas envy and other agonistic sentiments require independence: you can only envy what is not already a part of you. By emphasising love and its dangers, as well as social dynamism and change, the present discussion of Milpaltense feasts addresses a gap in the existing literature, which has so far mainly described them in terms of folklore and tradition (e.g., Ramírez 1912; Martínez Ruvalcaba 1988; Socolov 1995; Galarza and López Ávila 1995). I will now turn to how Milpaltense feasts contribute to establishing the notion that love means interdependent work and mutual sacrifice. First I will provide an overview of the *mayordomía de Chalma* and why it is important to Milpaltenses, then I will show how an idealised image of *complementariedad* (gender complementarity) is performed there. While Inmujeres’s mission is directed against “a colonial interpretation of indigenous relations, as culturally driven, nonmodern, and incompatible with modern feminism” (Radcliffe 2015: 59), for ordinary Milpaltenses, *complementariedad* may variably describe equitable or unequal gender relations (Hernández and Canessa 2012: 13). The reason for this variation will soon become clearer.



FIGURE 24: CROWD CUEING TO ENTER TLACOTENCO’S CHURCH FOR THE FEAST OF ST. ANNE

LA MAYORDOMÍA DE CHALMA

The *mayordomía de Chalma* mattered to Milpaltenses on multiple levels: It was a spectacular social event that crystallised communal and personal values, ambitions, histories, and affects. In light of these many layers of meaning, I will devote some space to teasing these out, before zoning in on my main topic of gendered work and sacrifice.

Apart from the celebration of each pueblo's patron saint, the pilgrimage to Chalma is the largest and most highly anticipated yearly event in Milpa Alta. Every 3rd January, hundreds of Milpaltenses join pilgrims from other parts of the region to make their arduous two-day hike to the Lord of Chalma in the State of Mexico.⁵³ At *mayordomía* events, devotees go to the large Lord of Chalma replica and either cross themselves before him, kiss his frock, or transfer a kiss from their hand to the statue. For example, I observed an elderly lady touching the Lord and then her eyes, reaching under her spectacles, to let him feel where to work his miracles. At the door, two young girls dressed as "*aztequitas*" (long black skirt, white embroidered tunic, red sash, hair in two braids with hand-woven ribbons) collected *ofertas* (donations) in exchange for a wallet-size paper image of the saint – the appropriate size for accompanying and protecting devotees wherever they go.

It was common for small-scale replicas of the Christ of Chalma to be granted a prominent space on a family altar and many proud microbus drivers had it mounted to the middle of their windscreen, often adorned with additional paraphernalia, such as necklaces or plastic flowers. These ubiquitous replicas, though generic, were made personal and efficacious by the pilgrim's choices and the experience of shared travel: The figures of a Christ on the Cross come in many different loincloth styles and skin tones. They are blessed at the Sanctuary of Chalma and brought home by the pilgrim. If they break during the journey or at home, they will either be fixed by local experts, or if too

⁵³ While Milpaltenses are often aware that anthropologists have described this as a "syncretic" or "hybrid" cult, which is described as having substituted the Aztec black cave deity Oztoteotl with a black Christ, Milpaltenses do not normally think of the Lord of Chalma in this way, but as a divine figure with multiple cults emerging from a long, intricate history, or "*raíz*" (root). Most do not seem to dwell on the differences between those interested in revitalising "ancestral" forms of devotion, and those focused on Catholic practice. Though some Catholic hardliners would strongly disagree, for most Milpaltenses, the Lord of Chalma's *raíz* does not make Him a "mixed" or "impure" figure – quite the opposite. Whenever Milpaltenses speak of persons or things having "roots", they are underscoring interwovenness (i.e., unity within difference and historical depth) and efficacy.

damaged, set to rest – not uncaringly tossed like common litter. There is a place on the mountains, Tres Cruces (“three crosses”), which is a veritable cross-graveyard.

Similarly, the *mayordomía grande* of Chalma in Villa Milpa Alta is at once common and personal, generic and unique. On the one hand, what makes feasts of this kind so powerful, is not only the sheer amount of workforce, money, and not least, faith involved, but also the sense of historical continuity they produce: a sense that year after year, even though participants and generations, the size of an event, and certain details and procedures change, the feast remains fundamentally the same. In this basic sense, feasts obliterate time and hierarchies through the power of repetition (cf. Bloch 1992).

Yet the opposite is also true: Feasts may serve to mark the time and certain differences in personality, taste, status, and passion. When an uncle of the *mayordomo* was showing me their altar, laden with devotional figures of the Lord of Chalma, the Virgin of the Assumption, their standards, other Christian images, flowers, a candle and two incense burners, filling the room with their intense perfume, I commented that there was likely little value in yet another anthropologist coming to study the *mayordomía* of Chalma, as everything worth saying must already have been said. He strongly disagreed with me: While everyone might know what happens at the *mayordomía* in broad terms, anthropologists have failed to acknowledge that “every *mayordomía* is different!”

This statement resonates with Cannell’s observation that beyond a ritual’s symbolic or social objective, which is usually the focus of anthropological interest, “what also matters about ritual is the experience of participating in it” (2007: 128). To the families who organise any large festivity in Milpa Alta, religious or not, it is their distinctive passion, hard work, and attention to detail that matter. For instance, the *mayordomos* choose the type of decoration of the festivity according to their taste and budget: in the above case, opting for *papel picado*, a colourful kind of tissue-paper bunting that used to be typical of the Day of the Dead, but that is now popular for any kind of festivity. They had also put up many candles and white and pale blue balloons. At a different feast, wealthy *mayordomos* paid florists to create a lush array of flowers to form bouquets and animal shapes. The potential for creativity is virtually unlimited.

Therefore, unlike for Magazine’s interlocutors, the beauty of a Milpaltense feast is as important as people’s participation (2011: 4). For many Milpaltenses, the two

necessarily coincide, as only numerous participation can raise the money needed for a costly firework display, and only a beautiful feast is considered respectful to the saints and the community: Unappealing feasts are gossiped about and may inspire divine punishment. Not only speech acts and the circulation of bonding fluids, such as blood and alcohol, compel persons to contribute to the festivities, but also a stirring aesthetics. For example, Socorro fretted that her Day of the Dead altar, which she had set up at the end of her dining table, was not good enough. The dead can only visit the living if a both beautiful and bountiful altar has been prepared for them. Socorro's busy schedule working for her younger brother had not given her much time to buy what was needed. She finally found some relief when she managed to add some *papel picado* to the display. In sum, aesthetics and action are equally important, as feasts are both the labour and the expression of love: For beauty and love are strongly associated with one another, and equally stirring, compelling one to act, often impulsively.

More than a collective custom, organising a major Milpaltense feast also represents a deeply personal act of faith and reciprocity, and indeed faith in reciprocity. Several *mayordomos* reported they were investing a sizeable portion of their family's money and workforce to fulfil a promise they had made to God, Christ, the Virgin, or a saint, in return for a miracle that had already been granted to them. Accordingly, the *mayordomos'* sacrifices have a quasi-transactional structure. Furthermore, the temporality of Milpaltense sacrifice is ambivalent, given that repeated sacrifices form part of a diffuse relation of reciprocity, much like between family members or spouses, rather than merely a series of direct exchanges between heavenly and earthly actors. Thus, their often post-hoc nature inverts the sequence of standard definitions of sacrifice. This means that the efficacy of sacrifice is already guaranteed and that it cannot be reduced to devotees wishing to produce a functional outcome. In other words, sacrifices of love require a certain degree of reciprocity to be sustained, but the directionality of sacrificial action as a form of loving is flexible, rather than rigidly symmetrical between devotees and the divine beings. It is not fully predictable, capricious even.

For example, the amiable middle-aged mother of the *mayordoma* of the Christ of Chalma, said they had prepared an astonishing 3,000 kilos of ground mole to feed the pilgrims. No less than 150 people helped just with the key ingredient by cleaning the peppers and removing the seeds inside them. Milpaltenses said the guiding principle for,

and goal of, this mammoth cooking effort was *convivencia*, living together well: Everyone is invited *con cariño y amistad*, with love and friendship. *Convivencia* in the *mayordomía* is said to produce *convivencia* in Milpaltense society more broadly. Thus, in the *mayordomía*, Milpaltenses already experience the desired outcome of their efforts, lovingly living together, through the very act of making those efforts, but also anticipate the future reciprocation of these efforts on the side of their guests and, importantly, on the side of God and other figures of worship. I asked the *mayordoma's* mother about the role of faith in these activities, and she answered: “Yes, the Lord of Chalma works miracles in Milpa Alta”. Sobbing softly, she said her son used to be a drug addict. He had lost a lot of weight, dropping from 90 to 42 kg, and was not able to hold down a job. Fearing for his life, she prayed to the Lord of Chalma: “If you wish, take my son, don’t let him suffer...” Responding to her desperate willingness to sacrifice her son’s life to spare him suffering, thus selflessly renouncing motherhood, the Lord of Chalma performed a miracle: Her son is now clean and has both a job and a partner. He told her that the Lord of Chalma appeared in his dreams twice, telling him: “*Deja con eso. Vas a cumplir algo muy importante en tu vida.*” (Stop this. You will fulfil an important task in your life.) And so he gave up drugs.

At the same time, Milpaltense sacrifices are also directed at the future. According to Lizbeth, it is commonly believed that religious sacrifices in the present are necessary to secure future prosperity: You become rich because you are spending as if you were, though not for yourself, but for the patron saint. This might be compared to the logic at play in prosperity gospels, which have become highly popular in other low-income parts of the world.⁵⁴ Hence, Milpaltenses’ faith in divine reciprocity gives rise to a “gift economy”, a framework of indirect exchange in which everyone who receives gifts has the obligation to give back. This celebration of mutual, loving sacrifices stands in stark contrast to the neoliberal policies of Enrique Peña Nieto’s government, celebrated by *The Economist* (2012). As a university-educated teacher who placed great personal value in self-advancement, Lizbeth herself found the feast economy to be wasteful and preventing prosperity, rather than producing it.

⁵⁴ Haynes (2015) summarises the basic logic underlying prosperity gospels thusly: “faith is said to attract God, causing him to reward those who have put their reputations on the line by asserting that he will come through”; “money given to the church is meant to provoke a response from God, to compel him to make good on his promises”.

Finally, as much as leadership is indispensable to the smooth running of such a large and complex *mayordomía* as that of Chalma, it is always viewed with suspicion. If the *mayordomos* boss their helpers around, these may leave in protest. Many volunteers routinely helped out every year and therefore felt that their expertise should be recognised by granting them relative autonomy. Most importantly, volunteers saw themselves as working together with the *mayordomos*, not for them. Thus, the hierarchical order of the *mayordomía* was accepted in so far as it was an organisational device facilitating interdependence, but not as a technology of power. Instead, love was seen as powering helpers' actions – love for the Christ of Chalma, for the *mayordomos*, and for the pueblo. Several helpers emphasised to me that they were participating in the *mayordomía* of their own accord and that nobody gets paid for helping. Hence, not just the generosity and hospitality of the *mayordomos* is under public scrutiny, but that of the entire ritual collective. Both the shared financial burden and hard labour largely foreclose the possibility of “*protagonismo*” (showing off to seek independent attention and power, mainly in the context of self-serving leadership): an oft-cited anti-value, particularly with respect to politicians, reviled by most Milpaltenses.

In sum, the *mayordomía* is a space in which Milpaltenses express and negotiate values, traditions, and future aspirations that define their beloved community. The *mayordomía* actualises a sense of self that is indivisible from its social network, due to multiple forms of interdependency: economical, social, and moral. But these collectivist values and interdependency, which define Milpaltense identity as a group, should not distract from the equally important individual striving to make festivities meaningful by also making them personal through individual effort, choices, and innovations. Nor should it distract from dissonant voices, such as Lizbeth's. The “loving (self-)sacrifice” economy of the *mayordomía* represents a vision of love in opposition to the outside world's indifferent, independent lifestyles, which Milpaltenses encounter in the Mexico City centre or on television. Yet a relative indifference toward the outside world is already implied in love, as the *mayordomía*'s exclusionary practices suggest.

Although the *mayordomía* seemingly actualises the Milpaltense ideal of lovingly living together, this ideal rests on the exclusion of the unloved. For instance, while Milpaltenses might say that everyone is invited to eat at their festivals – and they certainly have been extraordinarily welcoming and generous to me as a European foreigner – this

is not entirely true. The *extracomunitarios* (migrants) living in their midst are rarely invited to participate in *mayordomía* events. Some Milpaltenses justified these exclusions by stressing that migrant labourers are devoted to other saints and do not enact interdependent relations with the community: They move around independently, untethered from (ritual) kinship bonds, and work for money. In brief, they fail to love. But what Milpaltenses who criticised those who do not contribute donations to the feasts ignored, is that some cannot afford to. The performance of values and of love hinges not only on one's morality but also on one's means to express one's morality in a certain way – on one's resources to love. Beyond the problem of needing to already have love to receive love, another paradox emerges when looking more closely at the apparent gender symmetry enshrined in the *mayordomía*.

LA MATANZA DE LAS RESES

To produce 3,000 kilos of *mole*, the *mayordomía* helpers ground 300 kilos of *pasilla* chili, 300 kilos of *mulato* chili, sesame, peanuts, almonds, plantains, cumin, aniseed, black pepper, cinnamon, and more ingredients into a rich brown powder and then mixed it with broth to produce a thick sauce.⁵⁵ Yet unusually, the meat accompanying the *mole* is not the traditional turkey, which would be far too costly and difficult to provide in the required quantities, but beef. Thus, in order to produce tonnes of this baroque dish, the *mayordomía* gathers two days earlier for the day known as *La Matanza de las Reses* (the slaughter of the cattle). This occasion spectacularly produces an apparent gender symmetry, as both men and women are seen to be working hard, day and night, and is a rare site where the complementary sexual division of labour associated with the ancestors is uncontested.

I arrived at the site of the slaughter and butchering, on the southern rim of Villa Milpa Alta, just before 11 am. 19 cows were set to die that day. A couple of animal transporters were parked in front of the house, almost blocking the entrance – making the bounded masculinity of the space tangible to me. When I squeezed into the yard, some men I had met at a previous *mayordomía* event waved at me to come over. A sober 40-something-year-old kindly offered me a guava-flavoured drink and showed me the

⁵⁵ See Gutiérrez (2015: 26-69) for a beautifully illustrated history of *mole* and other Milpaltense dishes.

basic division of labour. Mainly grown men were involved in the butchering, about 80 of them, but little boys were also helping with carrying items, such as severed cow heads. The light-skinned, somewhat reserved lady of the house explained that boys as young as 14 start performing butchering tasks. A couple of women and girls were on site to help with cooking and cleaning, but they mainly stayed inside the house, relinquishing the yard to the boisterous men. There were some cow carcasses hanging from the ceiling of the shed on the south end and different tables were devoted to the butchering of different cow parts. Legs, skin, head, and innards were thrown into large troughs. The legs were boiled in order to remove the hairs with more ease. Several dogs were moving between the different tables laden with meat, looking at it longingly, and occasionally running off with a discarded piece of hoof. Almost all parts of the cow's body were prepared for consumption – nothing went wasted.

The *padrino* (godfather) of music, who sponsored the music system and band rental for the event, referred to the slaughtering as a “*sacrificio*”, a word with a double meaning, translating both as “slaughter” in general and “religious sacrifice”. This double meaning fit the different attitudes of the participants of the event. Moved by his faith and the honour of hosting this *mayordomía* event, the owner of the property where the *matanza* was hosted cried during the early-morning welcoming of the helpers and the sacred *mayordomía* objects: the figures of the Christ of Chalma and the Virgin of the Assumption, and the *mayordomía* standards. Yet while not all those present thought of the event in the same religious terms, it was certainly a powerful, intergenerational, performance of machismo.

I observed three cow killings closely, one after the other. The smell was intense. One cow battled with death by strangulation and stabbing for several minutes, braying heart-wrenchingly with eyes open wide amidst the carcasses of her predecessors (see fig. 25). Another, smaller cow surrendered and died quickly. Enflamed with bloodlust, several men taunted the cow while she was being pulled out of the transporter and down the slope to the killing space. A man joked to a child that he should watch out as he was wearing a red T-shirt, which might arouse the cow. Another man with curly hair and a creased face in a blue overall drunkenly fell over. One youth had himself photographed with an intestine wrapped around his neck like a necklace. The blood was pumped out of the dead bodies and into buckets by stamping on them. Some men drank the fresh blood

from disposable plastic cups that they dunked into the buckets, dripping down the side, called it a “delicacy”, and mock-offered some to me. Many men’s work clothes were covered with blood stains. Some draped themselves in the weighty meat to carry it to a truck and get it frozen somewhere else. Several tanks of water were used to wash the meat and clear the pavement of blood. By 4.30 pm, the slaughtering had finished.



FIGURE 25: KILLING COWS WITH A KNIFE AT *LA MATANZA*

The division between male and female work spaces was not fluid, but, to an extent, porous. No women participated in the slaughtering because the bravado entailed and copious consumption of alcohol alongside were associated with *machista* masculinity. When I mentioned that I had been on the slaughtering ground to some women, they reacted with disgust, citing both the goriness of the slaughter and the men’s rowdiness: “It’s horrible up there!” Yet the men did not object to my presence – in fact, it was a welcome opportunity to make their shared sacrifices known to a putative wider audience and, for some, to flirt and thus enact another facet of *machista* masculinity. While Milpaltense women spoke of the machismo of *La Matanza* negatively, it actually took both socially desirable and unappealing forms: On the one hand, men performed masculine bravery, strength, stamina, skill, solidarity, and brotherhood, on the other, drunkenness, lewdness, womanizing, and aggression.

While the men were engaged in slaughtering and butchering, the women's activities were taking place at and around the *mayordomo's* house. The *mayordoma*, in her early forties, whose red hair dye stood out in conservative Milpa Alta, greeted me and invited me to eat a chick-pea soup and beans with *salchicha* (a grainy red sausage, like a big soft *chorizo*) and a lime drink to wash it down. While waiting for broth, I commented that Milpaltense women are hard workers, to which she responded that they used to work even harder before: for instance, making *mole* with *metates* (oblong stone grinding boards) takes a long time. Thus, festivities used to require a long row of women kneeling before *metates* to grind simultaneously. Today, women are in charge of making rice, beans, broth, *tamales*, and cutting *nopales*.



FIGURE 26: FEMALE HELPERS MAKING TAMALES

The *mayordoma*'s daughter, who called herself a city girl and found these customs boring, said she did not make *tamales* because you need to prepare the corn leaf in a certain way for it to stick properly and not come apart in the steaming process. This contradicted the other women's claims that *tamale*-making is easy and that the corn-leaf envelope simply sticks to the tamale by itself. However, many of the women I knew had such a routine in making *tamales* every time their family had something to celebrate that it had become an easy task for them (see fig. 26).

Making *tamales* might be considered a marker of Milpaltense femininity, which is closely associated with motherhood as well as cooking. The Milpaltense artist, Xospa Tronik, created a children's book titled *Baby Tamal* (2015), which describes the process of a mother making a tamale for her child. The tamale is depicted with eyes and rosy cheeks. In the book, Xospa draws a comparison between the way in which tamales are carefully wrapped into corn leaves and how babies are always enveloped by a blanket when carried outside the home. Furthermore, there is a regional myth about *El niño maíz* (the corn child). The ancestors said that people are made of corn, which is why no meal is complete without tortillas, always wrapped in cloth like babies and cradled in a small basket (cf. Dehouve 2015; Sandstrom 1991). Moreover, I have heard a Tlacotencan Nahuatl joke about the corn husk representing a woman's vagina and the tamale representing the man's penis. Despite these multiple associations with femininity and motherhood, outside the *mayordomía*, it is not uncommon for younger men to make tamales together with female kin, as Esteban proudly demonstrated to me.

The *nopaleras*, the women preparing the *nopal* pads for consumption, had a harder task, but never complained of pain to me (see fig. 27). They were using a plank and a long knife to remove the spikes. The plank is long and narrow, reaching from the floor to a woman's aproned abdomen. On this, she lays the *nopal* pad out flatly and cuts the stings off in fast movements, then does the same with the other flat side, and finally proceeds to the narrow sides. Despite their expertise, women still often get their hands pricked. After this, the *nopales* are put into a plastic container into which a male helper fills water, which is heavy to carry, and washes them.

When I asked people whether the sexual division of labour was a rule or just a matter of preference, they responded that this is simply how things are. It simplified organisational matters in so far as there was no debate about who should be carrying out

certain unpleasant tasks, such as slaughtering and butchering, or cutting prickly cactus pads. In part, the sexual division of labour was a practical necessity to ensure women's safety, as cheap vodka flows freely in men's workspaces and gives rise to drunken debauchery. However, as this distinction was porous, sober men and older women occasionally had to rescue distressed young women from unwanted advances by distracting their drunk friends.



FIGURE 27: NOPALERA

So the sexual division of labour at the *mayordomía* was in itself an expression of Milpaltense moral ideals because it enacted order and managed chaos, while working hard towards reproductive ends. The sexual symbolism of work which “reproduces” a particular way of life required both a male and a female contribution – gender complementarity. Because of their increasing exposure to global gender rights discourses through their proximity to the city, television, and education, the sexual division of labour in the sphere of marriage was contested among the older generations and often rejected entirely by the younger generations. Thus, the *mayordomía* might be described as the last bastion of conservative Milpaltense values and clearly defined sexual roles. It not only produced and reaffirmed the collective identity of Milpaltenses as a community of *originarios*, but also produced and

reaffirmed the cis-gendered division of sexual identities within the collective. Aesthetically, the sexual division of labour appeared symmetrical at the two sites, with men carrying out helper's tasks in the women's workspace. Mainly, they were carrying heavy items and constantly stirring the giant steel *cazuelas* (casseroles), to prevent the precious *mole* from burning at the bottom. However, there was a greater proportion of male helpers in the feminine workspace than females in the masculine workspace, indexing the potential for asymmetry within the framework of gender complementarity.

Thus, the sexually divided, but complementary spaces of the *mayordomía* visualised an apparent gender complementarity and supported the often-heard claim that men and women are basically equals in Milpa Alta. Yet while men and women may work equally hard in the *mayordomía*, and the spectacular nature of this collective effort draws attention to this apparent equality, women often carried the largely hidden, but considerable burden of food preparation alone in the everyday (cf. Adapon 2008). For instance, to prepare for smaller family feasts, the women of the family will spend at least one full work day making *tamales*, *mole*, and *champurrado* (a fermented corn drink). Hence, comparing the food-making labour of women in the *mayordomía* and in the everyday suggests that we must analytically distinguish spectacular and hidden sacrifices and their effects.

THE (A)SYMMETRY OF SACRIFICE

Spectacular sacrifices

It would be difficult to deny that communal celebrations are spectacular sacrifices, as they involve large sums of money but defy good business sense. As a high school teacher and former politician from Tlacotenco told me, his proposal to move the *elote* (tender corncob) festival to the side of the México-Oaxtepec highway to attract more visitors and generate more income was rejected by the town's elders. They insisted that the very point of the festival lay in welcoming people into the heart of Tlacotenco and make them get to know their town, in other words, in displaying hospitality. The teacher's lament reminded me of a previous interview with the *coordinador* (town mayor) of Santa Ana Tlacotenco at the start of my fieldwork. He described Milpa Alta in general as "*la provincia del Distrito Federal*" (the provincial area of the Federal District), as he had to approve road blocks whenever

fiestas were being celebrated, such as carnivals, or *fiestas patronales* (patron saint celebrations). In analogy with these physical blockages, he said that many city people and progressive Milpaltenses believe such festivities “stand in the way of economic development” in Milpa Alta.

In addition to physically holding up the movement of goods and people, feasts defy the Calvinist maxim of accumulating wealth, investing it, and generating more wealth (Weber 1958: 87-92). For instance, it was not obligatory, and yet almost impossible for Tlacotecan families not to donate to the firework budget for the feast of St. Anne, called the *manzana*, “apple”, after St. Anne’s and Mary’s symbol of the apple, which stands for the prospect of an abundant harvest. The word for donation commonly used in Milpa Alta was not “*donación*”, but “*cooperación*” (cooperation), highlighting not the generosity of the individual donation, but compliance with a communal obligation, which is to say, making a contribution to a collective effort. Everyone’s names and the donated sum were read out on loudspeakers, but those who did not pay were publicly shamed, as their name was boomed out twice. The fact that the few *cristianos* (Protestants) in Tlacotenco neither paid into the *manzana* nor took over any other *mayordomía* duties was a large factor in their asocial, and therefore immoral, reputation (Socolov 1995). While the *mayordomos* asked for 600 pesos (approximately 30 GBP), most people donated less than half that amount, for it was no small sum: At the time of my research, the Mexican minimum wage was 70.10 pesos per day. Thus, despite the apparent poverty of the population, large sums of money were literally burnt as fireworks. In the upshot, most Milpaltenses made both personal and collective economic sacrifices for their feasts, whether or not they chose to of their own initiative, or were cajoled into doing so. The public shaming involved shows just how important the maxim of sharing, or sacrificing, what you have was.

The *mayordomos*’ role necessarily involves conspicuous spending and consumption “*de todo corazón*” (from the heart), lest they be accused of a lack of generosity, hospitality, and love. While this inevitably draws attention to their personal wealth, which helpers and pilgrims gossip about and compare to the wealth of previous *mayordomos*, the system of the *mayordomía* simultaneously diffuses credit to everyone involved, as *mayordomos* depend on their helpers and on donations in order to organise food and drink, music, and fireworks. *Mayordomos* recruited helpers by firing fireworks into the sky on the relevant dates, which signalled the need to gather, and was usually followed by hundreds of people.

The expenses incurred by the *mayordomos* were never completely recovered, however. Like the *mayordomo*'s contribution, donations, too, were not pure gifts, but were given in exchange for *tamales* (corn-based dish typically filled with pork and a green chili sauce) and *atole* (a corn-based hot drink). Most donations ranged between 50 and 100 pesos, but some went up to 10,000 pesos. The amount of tamales handed out was proportionate to the size of the donation: For every 100 pesos, one got a kilo of tamales. Fairness was foregrounded here.

Beyond these very public financial contributions, many Milpaltenses visibly donated substantial time and effort to feasts. For example, Socorro mentioned that her niece's wedding three years ago was "very traditional": On the day of the feast, a little mole was slapped onto freshly made tortillas and handed out to the guests without a plate (see fig. 28). At a "traditional" wedding, the *tlacuateras* explained, enacting the local ideals of hospitality and respect requires that no service staff should be hired but only the hosting families should be serving the guests – however, many families struggled to meet this expectation. Moreover, the bride couple and family members were expected to contribute substantially to entertaining the guests with dances and musical performances.



FIGURE 28: SHOWING HOSPITALITY BY KINDLY OFFERING MOLE ON TORTILLAS

In any case, an ideal feast involves investing a spectacular amount of money, time, physical effort, and creativity, but all of this has to be done *con gusto*, as Magazine (2011) rightly observed. Even more importantly, feast hosts and helpers have to do their work *con cariño*, with love. Milpaltenses' attitude of love in their personal sacrifices is reminiscent of Evans-Pritchard's observation that the Nuer people he studied in the 1940s expressed cows must not simply be killed for food, but only toward a sacrificial end, lest they curse their slayer: "Nuer explain to God why the life of the ox is being taken, and they may also address the ox and tell it why it is being killed" (1953: 193). In the Nuer case, not only the sacrificer's, but also the victim's intent was essential for the success of sacrifice. An important effect of rendering sacrifice visible, then, is to create an image of purpose and obligation, shared by all sacrificing members of the community. This contrasts with tensions surrounding structured inequalities, disappointments, and the messiness of everyday life, which may limit some individual's ability to sacrifice, or force others to sacrifice disproportionately.

Hidden sacrifices

"Mexican sacrifice" stereotypically brings to mind gory images of human sacrifice atop pyramids (e.g. Bataille 1992). Yet following Mayblin, "the drama of ritual sacrifice – that is of sacrifice exposed – must be distinguished from the hidden sacrifice of constant, ongoing, self-giving" (2014: 361). These two types of sacrifice are categorically different, as the latter has "no defined or authoritative end" (ibid.). Much like the ordinary Catholic women in rural Pernambuco, Brazil, studied by Mayblin, many Milpaltense women expressed that mothers have a duty to endure deep pain for their families. My older female friends would often speak of how much they suffered for their families as daughters and as mothers, and took pride in that suffering. When assessing other women, the ability to endure suffering and work hard, or the absence of these qualities, were often highlighted accordingly. For example, among the choir ladies, "*andar por la calle*" (going out) was considered to be a very negative quality in a mother, as she should not seek her own enjoyment, but rather stay at home and watch over her children. On Mother's Day,

selflessness was one of the most frequently exalted maternal qualities, as the following modern poem from one of my Nahuatl classes in Milpa Alta shows:

Tenantlabuitzꞗcaltoton

Song of Praise to Mothers

Nonemiliz tlaꞗobnantzin

Beloved mother of my life,

titeicnalitzin

you are pure selflessness.

ximotlabuitzꞗcalcelilli

Receive this song of praise

ihualmica noyollo

with all my heart.

[...]

Ámparo struck a similar tone in a poster on the wall of her home, where the *tlacnaleras* met for their rehearsals:

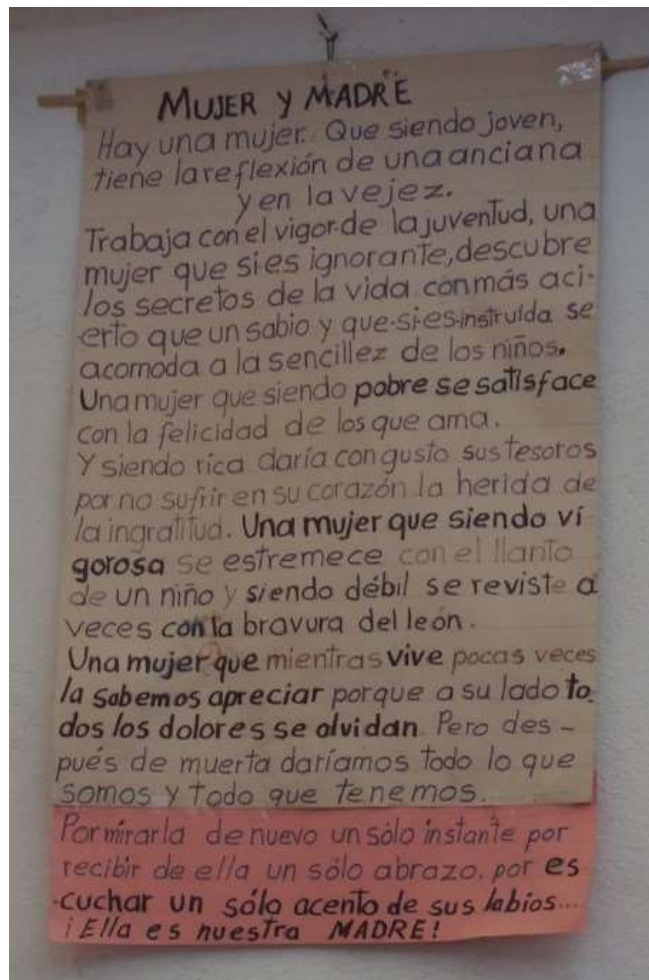


FIGURE 29: AMPARO'S POEM, "MUJER Y MADRE" (WOMAN AND MOTHER)

Woman and Mother

There is a woman. Who, while young, has the consideration of an old lady, and in old age, works with the vigor of youth; a woman who, if ignorant, discovers the secrets of life with better judgment than a wise man, and if educated, adapts to the simplicity of children. A woman who, when poor, is content with the happiness of those whom she loves. And when rich, would give her treasures with pleasure in order to not suffer in her heart the wound of ingratitude. A woman who, though strong, trembles at the cry of a child, and though weak, at times summons the fierceness of a lion. A woman who, while alive, we rarely know to appreciate because at her side, all pain is forgotten. Yet after she is dead, we would give all we are and all we have [t]o look at her once more for a single instant, to receive from her a single hug, to hear a sole sound from her lips... She is our MOTHER!
(My translation.)

In addition, it is impossible to have lived in Milpa Alta and not to have heard the well-loved poem below, which is often falsely attributed to the famous 15th-century Aztec poet-king Nezahualcoyotl, and echoes the theme of loving motherly suffering:

<i>Nonantzīn: Ibcuac nebbuatl nimiquiz</i>	Dear Mother: when I die,
<i>motlecuilpan xinechtoca, ihuan quemman</i>	bury me in your stove and when
<i>ticchibuaꝥ motlaxcal xinechchoquiliꝥ.</i>	you make tortillas, cry for me.
<i>Tla aca miztlatlaniz</i>	If anyone asks,
<i>nonantzīn: tleica</i>	dear mother, why are
<i>tichocaꝥ xicnanquili: in cuahuitl xoxouhqui</i>	you crying? Say, the wood is damp
<i>ihuan in poctli nechchoctia</i>	and the smoke is making me cry.

(Anonymous)

One of the *tlacuateras* performed this poem on the main stage for the Day of the Dead celebrations, while another, dressed in traditional attire, played the mother, kneeling on a *petate* (reed mat) and grinding corn on a big stone *metate* and pretending to make tortillas. When I first translated the poem as an undergraduate student in a Nahuatl class in Germany, it struck me as being quite cruel: the child wants its mother to suffer in silence,

foreclosing any chance of consolation. However, in Milpa Alta, it is exactly a mother's loving suffering, her sacrifice, which is a great source of respect, and thus power, for her.

All three texts, like many everyday women's narratives I witnessed over the course of my fieldwork, connect mothers with self-sacrifice and love. Even though the qualities celebrated in the poems are not exclusive to mothers, I have not encountered any similar poems about fatherhood. Socorro in particular often lamented having sacrificed her career for her siblings and helped raise many of their children, while remaining poor and never reaping the benefits of motherhood herself. For Mayblin (2014), this asymmetrical narrative association of sacrifice is explained by the hidden nature of women's sacrifices, requiring targeted efforts to render these visible. Milpaltense women's sacrifices are often literally hidden: In the humblest abodes, cooking took place in courtyard shacks, or, in low-income households, kitchens were at the back of the house, and were sparsely decorated, often consisting of little more than bare brick walls and a gas cooker, while the parlour might have a brightly painted finish, suggesting middle-class belonging. Milpaltense kitchens are typically very private spaces and are not meant to be seen by visitors. In Socorro's middle-class house, the boundary between the large living room and her neat, but cramped, kitchen space was marked by a lace curtain. Another key type of housework, washing clothes, often happened on roofs or back yards, and was done by hand, with the exception of the wealthiest families – a hidden, yet terribly onerous task, particularly in the cold winter months. Because of it being easily overlooked and forgotten, the sacrificial nature of women's work may be subject to doubt and can only be brought to consciousness discursively but is often left untold to avoid accusations of *protagonismo*.

Fathers, whose sacrifices and hard work, such as toiling in the field and earning wages, were more easily seen and recognised, did not need to draw attention to their sacrifices, and rarely did (see fig. 30). Sacrifices that did not follow this gendered pattern typically earned less respect: For instance, I previously mentioned one young couple who had reversed what are considered to be the traditional gender roles, but which eventually split, as the wife fell in love with a more “*macho*” man. In another case, a young woman had entrepreneurial ambitions, only to be criticised by her partner for neglecting her duties in the household and was eventually thrown out.

As emerged from the example of *La Matanza de las Reses*, there is a distinction to be made between collective ostentatious labour-as-sacrifice, which both men and women partake in, symbolically performing gender complementarity on a grand scale, and the asymmetrical sacrifices men and women perform for their families. In other words, *mayordomías* transform the untold sacrifices of everyday life into spectacular events of conspicuous consumption and sacrifice by putting both men and women's hard work into the spotlight, but in doing so, they create the illusion that men and women sacrifice equally in everyday life. As public rituals, feasts appear to encompass and erase women's everyday sacrifices (cf. Irigaray 1993). What are the implications of this insight for anthropological feast theory?



FIGURE 30: MEN DOING FIELDWORK

Rethinking feasts

As the fireworks of St. Anne powerfully impressed on me, Milpaltense feasts are excessive, emotional, and spiritual displays of love. This is particularly evident in July, the height of the rainy season in Mexico, when the fields flourish in luscious green and the

crops ripen: a month full of celebrations of love and fertility, such as weddings. But Santa Ana Tlacotenco's greatest festivity of the year is, beyond doubt, the Feast of Lady St. Anne.⁵⁶ The church is filled up with flower offerings (see fig. 31), the saints' cloaks are changed by young women, bands compete for a time slot to serenade St. Anne before the altar. All day, the church courtyard was full of dancers and pilgrims, the streets of the town were filled with market stalls and fair rides, and in the night, celebrations culminated in the firework spectacle. In accordance with biblical tradition, St. Anne is the patron of fertility, so that thousands of people cue up for an opportunity to touch the glass of her shrine in the church of Santa Ana, either to bid for a child, or to give thanks for having been blessed with one. At the time of my fieldwork, one man was so grateful to St. Anne that he bought her a crown of pure gold and entertained her with a mariachi band. This shows that saints are not only the object of love and celebration, but may also bring love and joy into the lives of their devotees. Socorro said she met a girl who asserted that St. Anthony of Padua led her in finding a wonderful boyfriend in exchange for 13 coins. Having heard this, Socorro mock-regretted never having attempted this ritual herself when she was younger. On a more mundane level, many of my Milpaltense friends described feasts as a place where young Milpaltenses exchange furtive glances and shy smiles, dance, and fall in love.

As these examples and the previous discussion of the *mayordomía de Chalma* show, in Milpaltense feasts, food, fertility, economic prosperity, joy and love are cosmologically linked to practices of marriage, hard work, and religious devotion. Sidestepping love, other anthropologists have instead interpreted the sacrifices of feasts as “a rehearsal that keeps alive the sentiment of rebellion until a historically appropriate moment” (Nash 1989: 202), in seeming opposition to Gluckman's (1954) famous functionalist study of Swazi “rituals of rebellion”, according to which rituals serve to cathartically air criticisms of those in power periodically to ultimately strengthen the existing order. One could describe Milpaltense feasts as expressing a “spirit of resistance” (Comaroff 1985), given the hard work and passion involved, which maps onto the previously described attitude of *lucha*. Yet the resistant spirit of *lucha* against outer threats is nurtured by compliant self-sacrifice for one's pueblo and land. Following Brightman, the political effects of rituals

⁵⁶ Technically, St. Anne's husband, St. Joachim, is also celebrated on 26th July, but he is barely acknowledged in practice. St. Anne is already considered to be complementary to the more important male figure of the Christ of Chalma, patron of sobriety and transformation.

are ultimately unpredictable: “Conservative and subversive meanings may fusionally coexist in inversionary ritual, and the subversive effects in particular may take diverse forms ranging from the revolutionary to the futilitarian” (1999: 279). It is not so much that, in Gluckman’s sense, feasts make racialised and gendered inequalities tolerable for Milpaltenses, thus preventing actual revolts from happening, but rather, certain meanings are given more visibility than others, so that social symmetry and harmony is emphasised over asymmetry and discord.



FIGURE 31: AN ABUNDANCE OF FLOWERS FOR ST. ANNE

As expressions and celebrations of love, Milpaltense feasts highlight disciplined, hard work, excessive consumption and emotional release. According to Martínez, social theorists’ functionalist explanations of consumption in terms of status display, distinction, and social regulation fail to acknowledge “the ephemeral joy and wonderment that can be derived from momentarily transcending the boundaries of necessity and indulging in a fantasy of unlimited abundance” (2010: 610). Yet I would argue that there is more to festivities than their (anti-)economical aspect when seen from the vantage of Milpa Alta:

Beyond utilitarian productivity, arational excess, and competitive sentiments of envy and pride, Milpaltense feasts are primarily about love, care and commitment. Tacitly, they demand answers to the question, “will you work, celebrate, fight with us, now and forever?” *Pace* Nash, feasts are not a mere rehearsal towards a greater goal, but are themselves the moment of truth.

Because this model of love requires constant actualisation and affirmation, Milpaltense non-stop celebrations – in terms of the community as a whole, for no single individual could attend all 700 feasts – are not all that excessive, but in a sense necessary. Why settle for a lesser love? By claiming to disavow the anti-values of greed, selfishness, chaos, and exploitativeness, while actively affirming the communal values of love, hard work, *convivencia*, *generosidad*, *hospitalidad*, and *lucha*, Milpaltenses collectively signal their readiness to self-sacrifice. Love and sacrifice transcend boundaries, binding the saints, place, and people as one, while simultaneously marking boundaries, excluding *extracomunitarios*, distinguishing male and female spheres, and revealing differences in wealth, taste, and social capital.

In light of the material presented, the received anthropological antithesis between the selfishly agonistic sacrifice theories put forward by Mauss (1990) and Bataille (1992) and “pure gift” theory (Laidlaw 2000) appears strangely testosterone-heavy. As Graeber puts it, “The overall effect of reading through this literature is remarkably bleak; one is left with the almost Gnostic feeling of a fallen world, in which every aspect of human life is threaded with violence and domination” (2001: 30). Graeber’s unapologetically idealist solution is to imagine a world without violence and domination. Many Milpaltenses, on the other hand, would object to this conflation and point out that violence, such as chastising a naughty child, or killing cows, can be a good thing if it is performed in the spirit of love, caring, and sharing, rather than of selfish domination. Accordingly, my critique of previous sacrifice theories is not directed against their fascination with violence, but against their lack of interest in love.

That is not to claim that love and domination are necessarily exclusive. Yet the companionate ideal of marriage described by many of my interlocutors, just like the gendered division of work in the preparation of feasts, excludes domination: Men and women should ideally not be coerced into performing their respective tasks, but simply be reminded and motivated to fulfil their responsibilities as gendered, married subjects. If

they bail on their commitments, punishment may be in order. In the *mayordomía*, the gendered distribution of tasks appears symmetrical and rarely gives rise to friction between men and women. Where frictions do arise, others are quick to intercede. At home, the distribution of tasks and opportunities is far more complex and varied, and often markedly asymmetrical. Guilt, anger, envy, and disappointment are the stuff of marital discord – more so, when, in light of cramped living conditions and work schedules, there is no room of one's own, no gendered sanctuary, for one to retreat from the heat of the argument, and no time to reflect and catch one's breath. And so the violence of asymmetry easily comes to be reflected in the infliction of terror and pain, though – and this is important – the latter cannot be reduced to the former.

Following Geertz, ritual both models the world and is a model *for* the world (1993: 93). For many Milpaltenses, feasts cannot be reduced to a means to a political or economic end. Instead, the assertion that feasts are about love needs to be taken seriously. Of course, love has political and economic implications, but necessarily exceeds these through its affective and spiritual power. This love is not simply a fate that befalls Milpaltenses: It is actively produced through constant work and (self-)sacrifice. And like the love of ordinary couples, feasts are exciting and dangerous, as they foreground and perpetuate social unity as well as differences and are sites of debauchery and sacrifice. They contain within them the potential for violence.

CONCLUSIONS

Somewhat tautologically, Milpaltenses are often defined by their love of feasts as the celebration of, and cosmic reproduction of, love. This means feasts create and celebrate core communal values of *convivencia* (living together) and *cariño* (love). However, some individuals, such as Protestants and *extracomunitarios*, are excluded both from and by this love, as they do not visibly contribute to communal feasts. In addition, some younger Milpaltenses lack the necessary skills and interest to fully participate. Moreover, unlike many women's everyday hidden sacrifices, feasts draw attention to an exceptional situation in which men and women work equally hard, as both men and women say this is not the case in everyday life. Finally, angering the saints may trigger divine punishment. Thus, the love of divine beings at the heart of Milpaltense festivals is as spectacular,

powerful, and troubling as the love of mortals. Feasts contain within themselves the same kinds of dynamics and contradictions I previously described for the conjugal relationship, such as complementarity, joy, and mutual self-sacrifice.

This powerful, deceptively homogenous, cosmic performance and model of cis-gender relations appears to compete against Inmujeres' feminist vision of gender equality. While feasts seem to naturalise the traditional sexual division of labour, without acknowledging the violences involved in maintaining that division, this does not make them a form of "cultural violence". If *mayordomía* helpers are willing a particular local ideal of love into being, this may appear to obscure the frequent failure of that ideal. Yet, as previous chapters have shown, Milpaltenses often acknowledge and criticise gender violence, and the traditional division of labour is becoming less common in their families. I thus suggest that feasts represent not ignorance of, but a refusal to capitulate to, the failures of love. In any case, the considerable affective and spiritual power of feasts is as complex as their political and economic implications.

Conclusions

Everything I know, I know because of love.

Leo Tolstoy – “War and Peace”

I set out to write about violence and ended up writing about love. This is just one of the many ways in which researching “violence against Indigenous women” in Milpa Alta radically reconfigured my understanding of the phrase, forcing me to rethink every word within it. I will begin by tracing my journey to reaching this unexpected destination and draw out my main ethnographic findings along the way. This will allow me to comment on why this study diverges from other studies of violence against women and to illuminate its broader implications for anthropological theory and feminist activism.

ETHNOGRAPHIC SUMMARY

In Chapter 1, “Indigeneity” and “authenticity” emerged as constructs that Milpaltenses strategically invoke in order to protect their rights within the multiculturalist Mexican state, but also to engage in a highly complex politics of distinction within their own community. I introduced the concept of *interweaving* to describe how Milpaltenses selectively create unity within difference, for example, by coming to identify with the forest by getting to know it in depth and incorporating forest motifs into one’s artistic practice. Similarly, several Milpaltenses expressed that a married couple comes to harmonise and develop a shared project by developing a deep understanding of each other’s perspectives and depending on each other in one’s (pro-)creativity. Building on this notion of interweaving, I challenged the Inmujeres director’s assertion of a radical difference between feminist, anthropological, and Milpaltense perspectives on violence against women in Chapter 2: On the one hand, ethnographic and activist ways of knowing influence each other; on the other, violence against Milpaltense women is interwoven with

other violences, such as colonialist and discriminatory development policies. I also challenged the misleading concept of “cultural violence”, which Inmujeres has employed in some of its communications: it is far too simplistic to blame “culture” for the legitimisation and perpetuation of violence in Milpa Alta, given that the conceptualisation of violence is ever-changing and internally contested, drawing from a multiplicity of influences and traditions. However, some Milpaltenses may leverage “cultural violence” for their own benefit.

Having complicated the concept of “the Indigenous”, I went on to ask what Milpaltenses understand “violence” and “femininity” to mean. As discussed in Chapter 3, most Milpaltenses did not speak of “violence” as such, but divided people’s actions into “orderly” and “chaotic” ones, meaning that some actions help to maintain the social order, while others challenge it. Neither maintenance nor challenge were viewed as good in themselves, but had to be judged in the context of their occurrence. While “chaotic” violence was considered to be unpredictable, “orderly” violence was divided into types associated with women, such as gossip, and types associated with men, such as exerting control over female kin’s physical movements. This shows that meaning-making surrounding violence often follows cosmological patterns, potentially leading to significantly different interpretations of the same act. As these divergent cosmologies draw from various influences, they cannot be subsumed into a single “Indigenous”, or Nahuatl, cosmology.

The idea that women have an equal potential for violence as men do, was explored more deeply in Chapter 4, which focused on the concepts of the “strong woman” (*mujer fuerte*) and “warrior woman” (*guerrera*). These concepts enshrine how many Milpaltenses idealise women’s creativity, hard work, and metaphorical and literal defence of their families, community, and land. Yet unlike the feminist activist concept of “empowerment”, which has a positive charge but tacitly negates the possibility that women already hold power, the power many Milpaltenses associated with women as mothers, cooks, healers, and gossips has an ambivalent connotation, as women may use it to do harm, in the same way as male politicians may do. The concept of “strong womanhood” is also ambivalent in its effects, as it may both encourage women to accept patriarchal structures and inspire resistance to these. To wit, many Milpaltenses viewed men and women as differently, but equally, powerful, while simultaneously

acknowledging that violence against women was a problem in their community. Rather than using the assertion that “men and women are equally powerful” to mask systemic gender inequality, they showed awareness of multiple models of gender equality co-existing in the same space.

Therefore, the first chapters of this thesis established that “violence against Indigenous women” is not a universally applicable concept. It does not capture many Milpaltense women’s experiences in a way they intuitively recognised, as it casts them as victims, which they associated with undesirable weakness, stresses differences in power between men and women without acknowledging their different powers, presents violence as necessarily bad, regardless of the outcome, and imposes an “Indigenous” identity on women, which many rejected because they associated the term with backwardness, rather than with Milpa Alta’s Aztec and other ethnocultural heritage. Instead, when my female interlocutors spoke of violent experiences, as detailed in Chapter 5, they drew attention to the inherently dangerous nature of love. Both love and violence were presented as powerful, ambivalent forces in their lives that could transform not only the nature of a relationship, but also how people relate to themselves and others. At the same time, the simultaneous circulation of different, competing concepts of love gave rise to various tensions regarding marriage and women’s work. They broadly distinguished a model of interdependent love associated with “traditional” gender complementarity from a model of independent self-love associated with “modern” individualism promoted by *Inmujeres*. What exactly constituted “healthy” love for my interlocutors varied considerably, and only some kinds of love were actually attainable to them. For instance, interdependent love requires both partners to do their part and self-love is difficult to maintain against others’ negative evaluations. Milpaltense women’s stories underscore the sometimes wonderful, other times terrible, but ultimately inescapable interdependency of social life.

This interdependency was spectacularly enacted in huge festivities to honour saints and public holidays, as described in Chapter 6. As feasts celebrated and reproduced love, they were prone to the dangers of love. While love highlighted the unity of those who share it, it was based on the exclusion of certain others: migrant labourers from more deprived regions of Mexico, whose work in the nopal fields was essential to producing the food that was consumed at the feast. Importantly, feasts drew attention to gender

complementarity in a visually symmetrical form, de-emphasising the lived asymmetries between husbands and wives in the everyday. Though many Milpaltenses expressed that, ideally, both husband and wife should be self-sacrificing for their family, in practice, women often toiled for longer hours than men, struggled to have their “hidden” sacrifices acknowledged, and were less able to shirk their responsibilities.

In light of the above, it becomes clear why some Milpaltenses expressed that violence could only be understood in relation to love – love of oneself, one’s partner, family, community, and the land. Recall Zucaritas’ words after Adelita’s funeral: “You want to know what violence is? That’s like asking, what is love?” My Milpaltense interlocutors speculated that Adelita’s husband might have killed her if their love had given way to *desamor* (the state of falling out of love), or an *extracomunitario* (stranger to the pueblo) might have killed her, as *extracomunitarios* do not share the *pueblo’s* love. This logic was often extended to violent incidents they heard about in the news: Many considered disappearances and murders to be symptomatic of a cruel, loveless, spiritually bankrupt world beyond Milpa Alta’s limits.

Accordingly, rather than describe intimate violence as “violence against women”, which is to say, as a gendered phenomenon, most Milpaltenses thought of intimate partner violence and love as, in principle, gender-balanced phenomena which, in order to be socially acceptable, had to be expressed in gender-specific ways. Worded differently, men and women were viewed as having an equal potential for love and violence, both in the negative and the positive. Both affective forces may serve as a “social glue,” or to promote chaos, depending on their concrete manifestation. However, order and chaos do not map onto a good-evil distinction, as both may be productive, depending on the context. Moreover, as violence and love were linked to notions of sacrifice, both could only be understood in relation to ideas about the cosmos and its workings. Yet this was complicated in a multicultural space where multiple concepts of violence, love, and power as well as models of gender relations clashed. Therefore, in Milpa Alta, love emerged as the main battleground where notions of violence, power, and identity competed, such as Inmujeres’ “empowerment” discourses versus local notions of already powerful “warriors,” or “violence against women” against “gender complementarity”.

KEY ARGUMENTS

These findings challenge several pernicious misconceptions in feminist activism surrounding violence against women and, to a somewhat lesser extent, also in the anthropology of violence and gender: 1) Violence is bad or evil; 2) love and empowerment are good; and 3) love and violence are mutually exclusive. These are of course crude simplifications of what are, in practice, often much more nuanced assertions, precisely because they do not hold up to reality. Yet I consider these simplifications to be necessary for drawing out some generalisations from the present research.

The value of violence

An inexorable drug war, grisly Juárez femicides, and the haunting memory of conquest, colonialism, and revolution have shaped Mexico's image as a place of violence. Yet what exactly "violence" is and whether it is necessarily bad is not only a question about understanding, but also about value. Drawing on Terence Turner, Graeber notes that the "ultimate stakes of politics [...] is the struggle to establish what value is" (2001: 88). Even within a sociocultural system, contradictions may arise as to how entities and actions become meaningful: poetic forms may "impos[e] a dominant set of meanings upon the experience of paradox" (Comaroff 1985: 118). Hence, in the attempt to map understandings of violence, I have ultimately mapped the struggle over the value of violence in Milpa Alta, which includes how it is conceptualised, felt, contextualised, and judged.

As noted in the Introduction, and by Riches (1986), most anthropologists employ the term "violence" pejoratively, following its usage in common Anglosphere parlance. Within the subfield of violence studies, there is a divide between the negatively morally charged view of violence advanced by structural violence scholars (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004; Farmer 2004; Adelman 2004) and the morally detached interpretations offered by cosmology- and poetics-focused scholars, which do not assume to know the meaning or value of violence in advance (High 2015; Whitehead 2004b; Harris 1994). By asking how a broad range of Milpaltenses themselves understand violence, or do not, showing its meaning to be perspectival, the present research critically combines the two

major strands of violence scholarship above with subjectivity and emotion-centred approaches, which are typically sympathetic to the research participants in question, whether these are rape victims or head-hunters (Mookherjee 2015; Das 2007, 2008; Rosaldo 1993). Influenced also by postcolonial feminist anthropological approaches (Abu-Lughod 2013; Povinelli 2006; Mahmood 2005; Tsing 1993) and the anthropology of love and sacrifice (Mayblin and Course 2014; Mayblin 2014, 2012, 2010; Taggart 2007), this broad theory mix allows me to represent the people in this text, including myself, as complex, embodied, feeling subjects whose moral and social worlds are in constant (de)construction, changing their position vis-à-vis violence, each other, and how to live in general. Moreover, it aids me in showing that Inmujeres workers as state agents, Milpaltense elders as community leaders, myself as the author of this text, and ordinary women with few opportunities to be heard do not engage in this process on equal footing: “whoever controls the narratives, images, and histories of violence stands very close to the matrices of political and social domination” (George 2004: 50). This complexity does not allow me to simply place my work in service of Milpaltense women’s “struggle”, as it does not exist in the singular, distancing this study from previous studies of Mexican Indigenous women’s struggles (e.g. Speed, Hernández, and Stephen 2006; Sierra 2004).

Returning to the question of evil, many Milpaltenses associated violence with love, by which they highlighted its affective power, embodied, relational quality, and transformative, even creative, potential. Accordingly, violence was only viewed as negative if it undermined social, political, emotional, or spiritual balance. Thus, contrary to the assumption that “contestably rendering physical hurt (i.e. violence) has cross-cultural validity” (Riches 1991: 295), my Milpaltense interlocutors collapsed the distinction between emotional and physical violence by highlighting both the potentially meaningful quality of violence in creating social “chaos” and “order”, and affective responses, including suffering. For example, particularly among Nahuatl-speakers, being disrespectful to an elder was often considered a severe form of misconduct, as it provokes rage, which may be life-threatening if it causes a stroke. At the same time, the term “violence” was typically avoided, given its negative connotations in wider Mexican society.

My ethnographic material also eludes Benjamin’s distinction between legitimate and illegitimate violence, which provides an interpretative frame for several studies of violence in Mexican Indigenous contexts (e.g. Raby 2012; Muehlmann 2013: 131). Such

approaches risk obscuring that systems of knowledge do not exist in isolation and that cosmologies and the convictions they engender are continuously changing and subject to contestation. Who has the authority to determine legitimacy is constantly contested in Milpa Alta: Leaders are only successful if they can motivate people to work on projects, but are resisted if they are perceived as giving orders.

So, the Milpaltense material supports the argument that violence is an inherently uncertain and indeterminate concept (Das 2008; Das and Kleinman 2000). However, uncertainty should not be conflated with aporia (cf. Bubandt 2014). The case of a disappeared girl in Milpa Alta, which haunted Socorro (briefly mentioned in the Introduction and Chapter 3), led me to recognise that violence is not so much unknowable, but perspectival, as its precise definition and visibility depends on one's cosmologically grounded perception of the world. In a country where many thousands of women are *desaparecidas* ("disappeared"; in many cases, trafficked) and the government shows little interest in finding them (Caputi 2010), there is much at stake in declaring their fate as unknowable. Almost always, someone knows what happened, and why. By chance, I found out that the girl was not physically, but socially dead to her family, at which point they were never going to mention her again, leaving her friends in a state of agonising uncertainty: an uncertainty that was actively produced at the interface of the parents' worldview and wider political circumstances.

The value of love and empowerment

Like many other feminist organisations, the premise of Inmujeres' existence as an agency devoted to promoting female empowerment and self-love is that many women are not already powerful and do not love in a healthy way. Well-intentioned empowerment rhetoric of this kind can have disastrous consequences, as other research has shown (e.g., Argenti-Pillen 2003; Friederic 2015). Similarly, given the importance Milpaltenses place on interdependence in marriage, Inmujeres' promotion of an individualist notion of women's empowerment risks socially isolating the women accepting this approach – including the director of Inmujeres herself, who, as a single woman, lamented feeling lonely and afraid. Consider Povinelli's critique of the detached, social commitment-free ideology of liberal humanism and its model of freedom: "Freedom does not authorize us

to speak, to critique, to find new modes of association” (2005: 163). More broadly, the under-resourced gender and development sector in Latin America typically places the burden of empowerment on the shoulders of those they aim to empower (Smith-Oka 2013), and Milpa Alta is no exception.

Most of my interlocutors viewed love ambivalently, as it brought both joy and pain into their lives, and did not depend solely on themselves, but on shared work with their spouses. According to Leona in the Introduction, love has intrinsic value, in so far as it enables productivity and creativity, and strengthens the family unit, in the same way as these things enable love. In her view, maintaining this love occasionally requires violent interventions, such as when one of the spouses is neglecting their duties. Note that while Leona may have internalised *machista* attitudes, which continue to be widespread and highly varied in Mexico (Gutmann 2007), similar statements by other Milpaltense women did not seem to have such overtones. Even though work is no longer strictly divided by gender among younger generations of Milpaltenses, the companionate ideal of love enshrined in Leona’s narrative remains strong.

Yet as Magdalena detailed in Chapter 5, Inmujeres taught her a new understanding of love, which excluded the potential for violence: If a relationship is violent, it is not love. For Inmujeres, a woman must first love herself, before she can love others. Even though Magdalena had adopted this individualist understanding of love, when she told the story of her violent marriage, she expressed doubt about whether it had been love or not. This shows that definitions of love that exclude a potential for violence are at odds with many people’s sentiments and instincts. Thus, Inmujeres’ love counter-narrative risks alienating women from their own memories and sensations, giving rise to confusion and self-distrust. The point I want to make is that Inmujeres’ pathway to women’s empowerment may involve women first having to develop an embodied sense of disempowerment before developing a new sense of empowerment as independent women.

The *nabual’s guerreras* underwent a very different process of subjectivation (see Chapter 4): As Soledad said, apprenticeship was a process of developing her intuition, loving herself the way she was born, and developing a sense of connection with the earth, her ancestors, and cosmic energies. In the *nabual’s* view, women had greater access to power than men in terms of their reproductive and creative capacities, including privileged

access to sexual magic. Thus, despite acknowledging machismo and masculine violence, the *guerreras* did not perceive women as disadvantaged vis-à-vis men, as they had developed an understanding of power which is not limited to secular political power (typically held by men) but also includes spiritual, creative power (more closely associated with women). From Inmujeres' perspective, one could argue, of course, that the *nabual's* concept of gendered power was convenient for male elders like himself, as it did not threaten his male privilege. Milpaltense women like Carmen, who sought to break into the masculine arena of politics typically faced pushback not only from men, but also other women. Effectively, the *nabual* simultaneously promoted both patriarchal structures and feminine empowerment, in the form of fostering an up-beat, reconciliatory fighting spirit among his apprentices. Due to the group's political influence, other, mainly young, Milpaltense women have begun describing themselves as "warrior women" in imitation of the *guerreras*.

Notably, most of the cultural revitalisation groups I worked with were female-led, but not exclusively female, and far more popular than Inmujeres' services. They offered all genders an alternative pathway to feeling powerful by developing a sense of pride in their cultural heritage as well as reinforcing local "strong person" subjectivities, such as being a *luchador(a)* and *trabajador(a)*. For instance, several *tlacuñaleras* had experienced violence in their past marriages. The *tlacuñaleras* rehearsals gave them an opportunity to speak about their experiences without being reduced to these – they were taking part as group members, not as "survivors", "victims", or "Indigenous women", which most regarded as undesirable identities. Similar to the Zapatista women in Chiapas studied by Speed (2006) and Hernández (2015), many Milpaltense women find the notion of feminism as a single-issue pursuit unappealing because they cannot separate their experience as women from other aspects of their identity, and are thus more interested in collective rights for their extended more-than-human community than in individual rights (cf. Radcliffe 2015: 53-74). Unlike these previous studies, however, Milpaltense women like Jenny taught me that the very same aspects of their identity that are often considered markers of their "vulnerability" may be seen as markers of their "strength" or "power" (see Chapter 4). She located the devaluation of being a "rural Indigenous woman" in the splitting of identities and the separation of humans from nature. For Jenny, feminine empowerment lies in interweaving what has been divided.

Loving violence, violent love

In light of the above, violence emerges as a process, in which given entities are forcefully transformed in a way that commands heightened attention. These transformations are shaped and made meaningful, or meaningless, and contested in accordance with localised patterns of sociality, structures, and concepts at the interface of specific space-events and larger historical, political, and economic processes. Notably, this also applies to love in Milpa Alta, as both may be viewed as manifestations of a *mana*-like understanding of power. The way love and violence are linked in Milpaltense understandings of sacrifice and power suggests that purely instrumentalist explanations of violence are inadequate in this context. Nor does this understanding of violence map onto Anglosphere-typical definitions of it as the illegitimate infliction of physical force and pain (Riches 1986: 1).

Among my interlocutors, violence was either viewed negatively and love positively, such as among Inmujeres workers (influenced by globalised feminist activist discourses), or both were viewed ambivalently, which was often the case among ordinary Milpaltenses. Thus, violence could only be understood in relation to love, just as Zucaritas and Magdalena suggested. In a different context, such as among Ilongot headhunters in the 1970s, Rosaldo argued that violence had to be understood in relation to anger (1993: 1-12). These examples show that foreign observers cannot assume that the opposite of war is necessarily peace, or that headhunting should be contrasted with civility, or battery with loving. For many Milpaltenses, love and violence may contribute to social order or chaos, rather than having a fixed value.

While there were very specific ways in which Milpaltenses linked love and violence, I would like to make a case for a broader inclusion of love in the analysis of violence. Linking violence and love easily gives rise to moral panic in the Anglosphere context, as considerable cultural and political effort goes into maintaining the current antithesis between love and violence. International feminist activism has sought to transform women's statements, such as "he beats me but (or because) he loves me", and its manifold variations around the globe, into meaningless tropes. Is it impossible for the battered women to also be a loved woman? Must her instincts be denied? More broadly, could it be that the well-meaning attempt to completely purge love of violence (consider

feminist “zero tolerance” slogans) and violence of love (consider affect-free drone strikes) is pushing both closer to the unforgiving, destructive end of their spectrum of expression, draining them of their creative, regenerative potentialities? Could another way of relating love to violence point towards a less frightening, more balanced world?

Perhaps it is dangerous to suggest this, but it is also dangerous not to check our assumptions. Noting that the boundaries between love and violence are porous, and identifying analogies between them, does not mean collapsing these entirely. Enrique’s view that lynching can be a way of caring for one’s community remains chilling to me. Yet telling women like Magdalena that they misunderstood love, because love categorically cannot be violent, blames her for her “mistake”, rather than her ex-partner for his conduct. A no-tolerance approach to violence means having to leave abusive partners, which is simply not an option for many married Milpaltenses. For them, both the moral and pragmatic choice is to stay, which shows that consciousness, choices, and economic conditions are inextricably linked. Similarly, many women will likely continue to style themselves as *luchadoras* and *guerreras*, until threats to their beloved community, including those posed by the drug war, environmental degradation, hate crimes, and corrupt authorities, are addressed. There is much at stake in loving less violently.

The usefulness of juxtaposing violence and love beyond the Mexican context becomes clearer if we revisit Graeber’s (2012) point that social inequalities are sustained by the threat of harm on part of the powerful, and fear on part of the powerless, as also applies to how male violence against women sustains patriarchal systems (cf. Confortini 2006; Hartsock 1989). Threats, as “areas of violent simplification” (Graeber 2012: 106), are *dead zones*:

“areas so devoid of any possibility of interpretive depth that they seem to repel any attempt to give them value or meaning. [...] It’s hardly surprising that we don’t like to talk about them. They repel the imagination. But if we ignore them entirely, we risk becoming complicit in the very violence that creates them” (ibid.: 123).

Much of the present thesis has been dedicated to showing that violence against women does not have to be a dead zone, given the enormous variety of interpretations

surrounding it. Among my interlocutors, experiencing it did *not* have predictable effects⁵⁷ – some endured it, while others challenged or left abusive partners, independent of the intensity of the abuse. Nonetheless, Graeber’s point is important because it accurately captures widespread attitudes to the study of violence against women in anthropology: Such studies have scarcely generated interest in the discipline, as they are precisely viewed to be describing a dead zone, devoid of potential for Geertzian “thick description”.

Graeber ends with a call for identifying and purging these dead zones, without explaining how exactly this should be accomplished: the only solution his key example offered to the dead zone of bureaucracy, was death (ibid.: 107). Fortunately, the present research points to ways of reviving dead zones. Carmen’s mother’s bureaucratic nightmare, described in Chapter 4, was resolved by Carmen accompanying her mother and standing up for her. I have observed something similar in accompanying a Moroccan friend to German immigration authorities: my presence ensured that they gave him a benign treatment, which had not always been the case when he went on his own. These examples suggest that injecting situations marked by discrimination and intolerance with love and solidarity does not eradicate such situations, but may make them more manageable.

This point seems obvious enough, but it was not mentioned by Graeber because his discussion is organised around a critique of the Foucauldian power/knowledge nexus, which, he argues, obscures that ignorance is as important as knowledge. My critique instead points at many Foucauldian theorists’ lack of interest in spiritual and affective power, which mattered greatly to my interlocutors (see Chapter 4). To avoid “warp[ing] our perceptions of what power actually is” (Graeber 2012: 106), I suggest that it would be more productive to speak of dead zones as “areas of *intense* simplification”, rather than “*violent* simplification”. For intense love, like intense violence, or a spiritual epiphany, all

⁵⁷ Graeber considers certain forms of violence to have predictable effects and extreme violence to annihilate meaning altogether (2012: 116). His argument was pitched against the tendency of many anthropologists of violence to look for, and thereby overstate, meaning-making (ibid.). While this may apply to certain cases, Whitehead’s (2004b: 70-71) argument that “modes of killing and violence [are] important forms of cultural expression in their own right, not just [...] epiphenomena of ‘deeper’ structural processes” is also often valid. Indeed, as the meaning(lessness) of violence is perspectival, I maintain that both Graeber and Whitehead’s argument may apply to the same incident at the same time.

drastically diminish agency. Not only bureaucracy and abuse, but also unbridled joy and lust can make intelligent people stupid.

The key point I want to make is that love and violence, kept separate, both produce dead zones. While this seems obvious for violence, it may be less clear how injecting violence into love could be a good thing. Making this point requires stretching the definition of violence to include mutual self-sacrifice in terms of hard work (see Chapter 6). In this light, Emiliano's idealisation of love and his *machista* tendencies do not appear dissonant, but interdependent (see Chapter 5): It appears that what makes certain kinds of machismo so toxic is not misogyny per se, but the desire to simplify love and gender, to keep love and violence, and men and women, separate and pure. Estrella and Leona succeeded in making their marriages thrive by arguing with their husbands and insisting that they shoulder the equal burden of emotional and productive work, not by upholding an impossible ideal.

This point is not only applicable to intimate relationships, and bureaucracy, but also to politics in the narrow sense of the word. Both love and *lucha* motivated Milpaltense "warrior women" to fight for their community. Arguably, juxtaposing love and violence was also crucial for advancing the US Civil Rights movement. As the 2015 historical drama film *Selma* beautifully captured, towards the end of his life, the pacifist Martin Luther King realised he needed the menace of Malcolm X to present himself as the reasonable party the government should negotiate with to contain the dangerous potential of African Americans' anger (Blake 2010). Today, Western media continue to celebrate King as an ambassador of love, while X's role in the rights struggle is viewed critically, due to his association with violence. Would they celebrate King, if X had never existed?

If there is one opportunity in rethinking the relationship between love and violence, it lies in highlighting the unequal conditions that lead to establishing their respective value and building, or collapsing, boundaries between them. Following Povinelli, the hegemony of a particular understanding of love, based on the liberal logics and powers it enshrines, is devastating for those outside it, such as aboriginal peoples of Northwestern Australia and LGBT people in the US (2006: 25). Therefore, if studying violence has led me to write about love, it is not to present a "redemptive narrative", but merely to "track the immanent dependencies that emerge in everyday life" (*ibid.*). This, as I hope is obvious, is a far cry from glorifying violence. What I am suggesting is that it is

also dangerous to romanticise love, or to posit simple solutions to the problems of either. All these simplifications produce dead zones. Containing the risks of love and violence, and productively holding these in tension, instead demands sustained effort on part of all parties involved.

INTERWEAVING WOMEN'S WORLDS

It may at first appear paradoxical that the global incidence of violence against women remains unabated despite international women's rights activists' increased efforts (but see Merry 2009: 186). Yet the present research shows that feminist organisations, such as Inmujeres, do not merely fight violence against women, but actively construct the object of their struggle and thus bring it into existence. As "the global policy field of gender and development (GAD) draws on western liberal interpretations of gender, group rights, and development [...] development actors often associate themselves with a normalised modernity, in contrast to a pathologised, unchanging society" (Radcliffe 2015: 13). Drawing on Maldonado-Torres (2007), Radcliffe argues that these interpretations are in turn based on centuries of "scepticism toward subaltern knowledges" (2015: 290).

Expressing a similar scepticism towards local gender relations, Inmujeres were seeking to educate Milpaltense women to embrace their urban feminist model of gender equality and "healthy" self-love and to reject sexual divisions of labour and spousal "co-dependence". Yet much as the *Lucha Comunal* articulated a certain resistance to rigid policy boundaries between humans as citizens and nature as resource as well as between Indigenous people as "backward" objects of development and non-Indigenous people as "normal moderns", many Milpaltenses resisted Inmujeres' attempts to separate women's from men's condition as well as love from violence. Instead, ordinary Milpaltenses often judged violent acts in accordance with the fluid boundaries commonly drawn between order and disorder, self-sacrifice and selfishness, "tradition" and "modernity". Thus, many Milpaltenses challenged Inmujeres' understanding of "violence against Indigenous women" by distinguishing loving violence and violent love from dangerously excessive forms of love and violence, as well as by refusing to identify as "Indigenous" people and by questioning the universality of women's social subordination.

Where Inmujeres spoke of “disempowered”, “voiceless”, “Indigenous” women, Milpaltense leaders instead lionised “powerful”, “creative”, “selfless” *comuneras*. Beyond these deceptively coherent contrasting representations – which, whether intended pejoratively or melioratively, seemed to converge around the idea that women were the ethnoracialised, principal culture-bearers of Milpa Alta (cf. de la Cadena 1995) – lies a myriad of women’s experiences and critical reflections on Milpaltense gender relations and femininities. In postcolonial contexts, politics of epistemology are often represented as a dialectic of domination and resistance, but are in practice far more complex (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992: 235-263). As was also the case for rural women in the Ecuadorian Andes, there was great “diversity within diversity”, unwittingly or strategically ignored by development agencies and local identity politics (Radcliffe 2015: 258; cf. Palacios 2005).

Yet what seems equally important, is that there is also unity within diversity. Rather than merely engaging in a discourse of difference, Milpaltense women also highlighted how their experiences of love, violence, and sacrifice linked them to each other, their families, their neighbours, their saints, guardian spirits and ancestors, as well as to rights activists (cf. Speed 2006). In this way, they contextualised these challenging experiences within a larger story of their lives, as well as the story of Milpa Alta and wider national and international struggles. Rather than amalgamating these experiences into a uniform mass, Milpaltense women’s words and actions artfully interweave these into the social fabric, as they envision and actively craft it, all the while retaining distinctiveness while also belonging to a larger whole.

In light of all this, did Milpaltense women need saving (cf. Abu-Lughod 2013)? One might be forgiven for thinking that if women are understood to have an equal capacity for violence as men, but are more likely to be beaten and killed by men, then the former claim cannot be true. It thus bears repeating that Milpaltense women were not being “duped” into accepting maltreatment because of being “mystified” into believing they were as powerful as men. When I asked Milpaltenses about the situation of women in their community, they often repeated narratives of “gender complementarity” and “violence against women” they had been taught and which anthropologists have often been complicit in reifying. Yet at the same time, like Magdalena and Leona, they also questioned and reformulated these narratives when they reflected on concrete instances in their own life and in the lives of those close to them. Their shifting consciousness was

comparable to that of the author: I easily risk falling back into the narratives I have been taught growing up and through my education. My concrete experiences in the field question and reformulate these received theories.

Accordingly, active manipulation and opportunism only had a small role to play in the reproduction of Milpaltense ideologies. Rather than deceive, the competing ideologies espoused by *Inmujeres* and by Milpaltense elders both expressed partial truths, as they influenced how people think and act, and what they felt entitled to. If enough people view women as powerful, then that view becomes fact. If enough people see violence against women as a problem, then that problem exists, and consequently can be fought.

Beyond this, in many parts of the world, a woman may be genuinely powerful (e.g., have more social capital or income than her husband, making him dependent of her) and be abused at the same time. Thus, independently of ideologies, violence is likely to occur wherever a conflict has reached an impasse in the face of power asymmetry, perceived or real. For example, Estrella was subject to beatings from her sister and her husband when she was a young mother and fully dependent on others' support, who also only had limited resources, so that she was perceived as burdening them. Her sister and husband did not have to beat her – that was a choice – but they might never have considered doing so under better circumstances. The point is that when Milpaltenses say men and women are equally powerful, they do not mean “all women,” but women in a relative, situational position of power, such as Estrella's sister.

In the postcolonial context of Mexico, competing ideologies are themselves giving rise to conflict, often carried out upon women's bodies, as women are often in an intersectionally more vulnerable position. These performances of feminine sacrifice may appear strange and familiar at once: “although the modalities of violence may be derived from the intimacy of a process of violent cultural differentiation, the intensity and occasion of its enactment are also linked to this global theatre of violent representations”, including “colonial ideas of primordial, tribal savagery” (Whitehead 2004b: 74; cf. Taussig 1987). Exposed to television reports of femicide and trafficking, certain individuals come to reproduce a globalised aesthetic of violence against women while simultaneously reproducing Milpaltenses' exotic image as descendants of the “violent” Aztecs, which Milpaltenses may internalise, or, far more commonly, reject. Similarly, Milpaltenses

variously emulated and rejected what might be glossed as a global theatre of loving representations, in the form of telenovelas, Disney, and Hollywood rom-coms. More than once, I observed young women reading the Spanish translation of *Fifty Shades of Grey* on public transport.

To summarise, well-intentioned measures to fight violence against women may actually promote colonial agendas and add to, rather than lessen, the burden of Milpaltense women. If we instead take as our starting point how Milpaltenses themselves articulate problems of violence in terms of love, it becomes clear that these problems are not merely located in relationships between men and women, but that love itself is a technology of power in the way it comes to stand for competing ways of life (cf. Povinelli 2006). In fact, that very process of contestation often gives rise to violence. Yet rather than subscribing to a particular ideology or cosmology of love wholesale, in practice, Milpaltenses were combining, adapting, and rejecting elements of these in their everyday lives, in relation to their circumstances, feelings, experiences, dreams, and many other factors. Therefore, studying understandings and poetics of violence and love through the lenses of gender and sacrifice not only sheds light on dynamics of power in Milpa Alta, but also on the complexities and contingencies of social life. Contrary to the Inmujeres director's simplistic assertions, then, violence against Milpaltense women did not constitute "cultural violence", in the sense of being socially acceptable or being directly reproduced via cultural institutions: Instead, normative claims about love and violence constituted claims to power.

Where does this leave us? While the vast majority of Milpaltenses agree that femicide is unacceptable, and the practice of disciplining is losing acceptance, a singular understanding of violence and its relation to love cannot serve or deny the interests of all women in a dynamic, plural space, nor can it do justice to their diverse, at times confusing and contradictory, feelings and experiences. Many Milpaltense women welcomed development aid, but often, they were not getting the kind of help they want in a language they can identify with – a problem shared with Indigenous women across Latin America (Radcliffe 2015). As the intersectional feminist Akwugo Emejulo aptly put it, "a 'call to sisterhood' is usually made by and for white, middle-class women" (Emejulo 2018: 271). Perhaps Milpaltense women will follow the example of Zapatista women in Chiapas, who have maximised their political impact by claiming their rights on multiple levels of

governance, shifting flexibly between alliances and registers as the situation demands it: “Weaving between political spaces or scales of power is a strategy of those who do not have power at any given scale of power from which to launch campaigns for their demands or basic rights” (Blackwell 2006: 149). Alternatively, Milpaltense women might imagine radically new ways of improving their lives – of *lucha*. For now, most do not engage in what they perceive as “conflictive” behaviour, whether out of fear, love, or fierce defiance. I will not indulge a desire for closure by suggesting a singular answer or goal for international feminist activists to work towards in solidarity, however well-intentioned. Nonetheless, the project of an international feminist activism is important: Like Magdalena, many women desire, and rely on, its support. Moreover, in an interconnected world, we are already implicated in each other’s lives. Thus, I conclude that learning to weave agreement into disagreement and disagreement into agreement is challenging, yet essential, for international feminist activism to succeed in actually supporting women around the world.

Thinking back to the father and his young daughter play-fighting on the bus to Mexico City, I am struck by how love and violence were playfully intertwined. After all I have written, this scene remains troubling – not because I already know what it will mean for the girl, but because of a growing awareness that I cannot know. This moment “could endure and do real damage not because it was always already in a finished state of achieved power” but instead, “the generativity and volatility of life as such [has the] capacity to actively shift or harden into forms of peace or violence, pleasure and pain, collectivities and chaos” (Stewart 2017: 195). What I do know is that the girl’s joy challenged stereotypical depictions of violence against women as a matter of trauma and suffering. At no point has it been my intention to downplay or trivialise the severity of the latter. These are, however, already well-trodden topics in the anthropology of gender-based violence (e.g. Mookherjee 2015; Mulla 2014; Das 2007; Argenti-Pillen 2003).⁵⁸ Milpaltenses’ stories pointed me towards another direction of inquiry, towards full, shared lives, including the pains and joys of work and love. Straying from the core literature on violence against women has allowed me to focus on what is genuinely underexplored in that literature and theoretically compelling about Milpaltense views on violence.

⁵⁸ See also Robbins’ (2013) critique of anthropology’s “suffering subject”.

Moreover, showing the potential for joy within violent relationships may guard against dehumanising those who have experienced violence alongside love. The girl's joy reminds me that there is so much more to her life and experience than I could ever hope to capture in these pages.

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Appendix

KEY INTERLOCUTORS

Beyond Tlacotenco's priest and Villa Milpa Alta's best known shaman, other important interview partners for this study were health workers in Santa Ana Tlacotenco and social workers at the Inmujeres (National Women's Institute) women's support agency in neighbouring Villa Milpa Alta, whose narratives on gender violence I compared with women's narratives in Santa Ana Tlacotenco, where Inmujeres's influence was comparatively weaker.

The *tlacualeras* or *tlacualchihqueh* (Nahuatl: "food-makers") of Santa Ana Tlacotenco

They were a group of about 25 mostly middle-aged and elderly women of vastly different class backgrounds and education levels, whose three weekly meetings in a private home consisted of singing, dancing, and Nahuatl lessons, as well as cooking, *chaquira* bead-work and back-strap-loom weaving workshops. I fully participated in most of these activities at the meetings, and occasionally took part in their performances at public events, such as an international folkloric dance fair in Mexico City. Men were welcome to attend *tlacualera* meetings, but usually only the husband of the group's leader, Amparo, a retired teacher, and one of her sons, Enrique, who acted as a photographer and social media manager for the group, were present. Other *tlacualeras* I mention by pseudonym are Lizbeth, Rocio, Conchita, Libertad, Eduviges, and Bety.

***Calpulli Xaxahuenco*: The *guerreras* ("warrior-healers") of the *barrio* (district) La Luz, Villa Milpa Alta**

The group's core consisted of four female apprentices, Cassandra, Soledad, Elena, Citlalcoatl, and one male apprentice, Juan, who met every weekend and were being taught by a male *nahuatl*-shaman. I did not become an apprentice myself and thus my participation

was limited to the “classes”, collective prayers, and camping with the group on two occasions. The *nabual* imparted a richly elaborated cosmological knowledge, which included Nahuatl traditions which he traced back to the 16th century, enriched by ideas from modern science and New-Ageism. Precisely because they were idiosyncratic, his teachings and the *guerreras*’ comments on these were useful examples of the shifting, contested cosmological underpinnings of gender violence in Milpa Alta.

The back-strap-loom weavers of the *barrio* Santa Martha, Villa Milpa Alta

The weaving teacher had learned the traditional Milpaltense weaving technique by working with elderly weavers and then began teaching this technique at weekly meetings in a cultural centre. The lessons were free, as the project was funded by a grant. Attendance numbers fluctuated with about fifteen regular attendees, including my friends Yolotl, Jenny, and Magdalena, with four occasional male participants. Over the course of the lessons, attendees learned to spin and warp wool, weave simple striped men’s *cenideros* (men’s belt) and more intricately patterned women’s *fajas* (women’s belt) and *cintas* (hair ribbons). Weaving was a dying art of great prestige, as it was associated with the ancestral Nahuatl identity, as well as hard work and immobility, which were two qualities closely associated with virtuous femininity in Milpa Alta.

A Catholic church choir for the Nahuatl-language mass in Santa Ana Tlacotenco

The choir consisted of six active members, most of whom were female and aged 60 or older. I observed and occasionally participated in performances on Sunday evenings and attended many of the practice sessions, which took place in my host, Socorro’s, living room during the week. The women discussed religious and personal matters during these sessions, including experiences of personal suffering. Their frequent conversations about fulfilling or missing their obligations towards the choir gave me an opportunity to observe power negotiations within a group. For example, whenever a middle-aged male guitarist attended, Don Pablo, he became the leader of the choir, which caused the guitar player Ana, who had otherwise led the choir, to leave the group. Other members are Delia, Estrella, and Rita.

***The Academia de la Lengua Nahuatl* and other Nahuatl teaching groups in Santa Ana Tlacotenco and Villa Milpa Alta**

Weekly advanced language classes were usually given by middle-aged or elderly men and attended by a mixed group of various ages, averaging around ten attendees. Similar to weaving, speaking Nahuatl, a playful, polysynthetic language, which lends itself to poetry, philosophy, and ingenious insults, is prestigious and celebrated at communal festivities, such as the Day of the Maternal Language and the Day of the Dead. The competing groups differed in their teaching style as well as in the orthography and pronunciation favoured.

Other groups

I visited a number of other groups, such as the *mayordomía de Chalma*, the largest religious stewardship of Villa Milpa Alta, in charge of providing meals, decoration, music, and other expenses associated with the pilgrimage to the black Christ of Chalma, Mexico State, which gave me valuable insights into local Catholicism and the ways gender complementarity is enacted through the sexual division of labour. I also visited a secondary school and a high school to interview teachers and pupils on the subject of communal troubles and violence against women.