

# COMMUNITY OF STRUGGLE

## *Gender, Violence, and Resistance on the U.S./Mexico Border*

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*Using 10 women's narratives, participant observation, archival research, and a focus group, this article analyzes women's social activism in a settler community in northern Mexico near the border. I argue that women's activism and emerging political consciousness provides a lens through which women critique structural violence and intimate partner violence and that ultimately provides new women-centered subjectivities. This article contributes to gender and social movements literature by examining the generation of a political consciousness engendered from women's grounded experience of living on the U.S./Mexico border. Furthermore, despite the unique sociopolitical conditions of the border, this article demonstrates that border residents have the agency to challenge, and more importantly, change their situation.*

**Keywords:** resistance; social movements; violence; transnationalism; globalization

### INTRODUCTION

Over the last 40 years, the U.S./Mexico border region has witnessed profound economic and political shifts because of the implementation of both national and international agreements. One result has been an increase of migration not only to the United States, but also to northern Mexico, creating a massive need for housing, health care, and education. Because of the intersecting power structures of capitalism, patriarchy, and

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racialization (Segura and Zavella 2007), Mexican border cities have failed to meet these needs, and instead local residents are forced to create for themselves what the state cannot, or will not, provide. This article examines one community, Maclovio Rojas, located between the cities of Tijuana and Tecate in Baja California, through the oral narratives of women residents and organizers. Communities such as Maclovio Rojas that have emerged under similar circumstances are also called *colonias* and are often described as Urban Popular Movements (UPMs). By situating women activists at the center of analysis, the case of Maclovio Rojas offers insight into the ways in which gendered state and domestic violence are negotiated and challenged at the U.S./Mexico border.

Significantly, in their struggle for land, Maclovianas have developed an oppositional consciousness (Sandoval 2000) that is simultaneously directed both toward the neoliberal state and at unequal interpersonal relationships shaped by patriarchal practices that condone violence. I say neoliberal state because, as Fregoso has argued (2007, 52), "the Mexican state is complicit with globalization through its neoliberal economic policies and disinvestments in the public sphere," which have created the conditions for what Segura and Zavella (2007) have called "structural violence" at the border. In the face of this, these women have not only fought for a piece of land to build their modest homes, but they have learned to weave in between the "safe" spaces they have created for themselves. These *mujeres fronterizas*, or border women, demonstrate that through a commitment to collective action, they have the ability to radically change their lives.

In analyzing the narratives of women from Maclovio Rojas, I want to underscore two points. First, while there is an increasing amount of literature on border activism (Coronado 2006; Dolhinow 2006; Pena, D. 1997; Pena, M. 2007; Sadowski-Smith 2002; Staudt and Coronado 2002), gender and social movements (Einwohner, Hollander, and Olsen 2000; Ferree and Roth 1998; Safa 1990; Taylor 1999) and domestic violence (Bush 1992; Fine 1989), these are usually treated as separate subjects of analysis. In contrast, this article integrates these areas of study to address the complicated realities that these gendered, class-based, and racialized experiences entail, and to learn how women activists are developing tools for transformation through an emerging political consciousness.

Second, I highlight the physical U.S./Mexico border as a site for change and agency—not merely as a site of passage. Much of the literature on transnationalism examines either the spaces created through transnational migration (Smith and Guarnizo 1998) or the important and

necessary coalitions that are built across borders (Bandy and Smith 2005; Brooks 2007), including transnational feminist networks (Moghadam 2001). Border scholars Ortiz-Gonzalez (2004) and Lugo (2000) ask us to consider the border not simply as a transit zone but instead to look at the border as a place of residence for millions of people. By positioning the border in this way, I am also building on the work of Ibarra (2007), who locates the border as not just a site for “leaving and arriving” but also includes within this site the lived experience and agency of these migrant women through the narratives of Mexicana border crossers. The unique sociopolitical experience of the border region creates the necessary conditions for the emergence of a woman-centered subjectivity that incites action. In this article I will demonstrate that the border region is a space where transformative politics can take place.

### **GENDER, SOCIAL MOVEMENTS, AND THE SOCIOPOLITICAL LOCATION OF “LA FRONTERA”**

Pivotal to situating my work in Maclovio Rojas is the literature on women’s roles in social movements in Latin America and U.S.-based Chicana/Latina activism.<sup>1</sup> This literature points to the tension women experience as they negotiate the public and private spheres. For example, Bennett (1992) has demonstrated in her work on UPMs in Mexico that historically no sector of the population has been more affected by the evolution of UPMs than women. She argues that because UPMs address issues such as housing, services, and the high cost of living—traditionally the domain of the mother-wife-housewife—women constitute the majority of participants of many UPMs. Yet, although they have become “vociferous and demanding” (Bennett 1992, 256), women continue to battle sexism within the UPMs (Valenzuela-Arce 1991).

Such have been the findings of Aguilar and Chenard (1994), whose research on women in Cuba after the revolution demonstrated that women have achieved power in the public domain but not in the private. They attribute this to machismo, which they state is “a residue of a repressive macho culture which has been dragged along since colonization. The culture which grew out of this, the perceptions about men’s and women’s roles are still very deeply rooted” (Aguilar and Chenard 1994, 107).

Still other research has underscored the ways in which women activists are redefining public and private roles. For example, Safa (1990) found that Latin American women think their roles as wives and mothers

legitimize their sense of injustice and outrage, thus they are transforming their domestic role from one of private nurturance to one of collective, public protest. In this way, they challenge the traditional seclusion of women in the private sphere of the family. Similarly, in Mary Pardo's (1998) study of Mexican American women activists in Los Angeles, she found that women's political activism was directly related to their roles as mothers and their other familial obligations. She states,

In both communities women employed gender identity to legitimate their community involvement. The fact that they used a traditional private role such as motherhood to frame new activity that is public and political deserves scrutiny. They validated their community activism by making it an extension of the traditional work they already do. This allowed them to become involved without jeopardizing traditional domestic arrangements. (1998, 161)

Pardo argues that the idea that politics is a public activity separate from the domestic or private sphere is a male-biased viewpoint. Political participation not only crosses boundaries between the public and private spheres but also relies on the relationship between the two. The research of both Stephen (1997) and Corcoran-Nantes (2003) also highlight the ways women's activism needs to be analyzed through a unity of experience and not a public/private dichotomy. Corcoran-Nantes states,

In Brazil, as in many other Latin American countries, women have created a political role for themselves based on their social status as wives and mothers but through which they have struggled for recognition of their roles and rights as workers, residents, and citizens. (2003, 127)

A useful way to characterize the contested terrain of the domestic and public spheres in women's activism is shown in the work of Diaz-Barriga (1998). He applies the borderlands concept to emphasize how, through a variety of strategies, women activists blur the distinction between the domestic and public spheres and simultaneously identify practical and gender needs. Borrowing from both Renato Rosaldo (1993) and Gloria Anzaldua (1987), theorists who highlight the creative ways social actors navigate the intersections of social experience, Diaz-Barriga underscores how women's involvement defies dichotomous representations of domestic and public life.

Drawing on this literature, and using the borderlands concept, I emphasize that while the literature problematizes dichotomous understandings of the public and private sphere, researchers point to women's experiences as mothers/wives as informing the roles they take on as public activists.

For example, in Dolhinow's (2006) study of colonias in New Mexico, she found that women who emerge as leaders are either single or in "unusually" egalitarian relationships. Yet, what I found in Maclovio Rojas is that the point of departure for women activists is not the nature of interpersonal relations found within the home. Through their political and personal relationships with other women leaders in the community, their consciousness develops and they respond in ways that are true to their newfound sense of self. The spaces of women's collective struggle in Maclovio Rojas are not contained in either the public or private sphere. Rather, in this article I demonstrate that women's activism challenges traditional gender ideas in both spheres simultaneously.

The borderlands concept highlights how Maclovianas, through their bridging of experiences as land settlers, activists, wives, and mothers, are transforming social relations and perhaps cultural meanings as well. I also build on this concept to show how interpersonal violence is challenged in the lives of activist women. Specifically, the narratives of Maclovianas speak to the emergence of a political subjectivity that identifies the ability to act. This new subjectivity, similar to Sandoval's notion of tactical subjectivity that posits the capacity to "de- and recenter, given the forms of power to be moved" (2000, 59), allows Maclovianas to simultaneously defy the state, transnational companies, and their experiences of subjugation within the home. This analysis of the lived experiences of mujeres fronterizas illuminates how collective struggles on the border not only work to undo the dichotomous nature of women's public and private roles, but also make evident the border as a transformative space that becomes the site where women come together to re-imagine and redefine gendered, class-based, and racialized social structures.

## **BACKGROUND: URBAN POPULAR MOVEMENTS AND MACLOVIO ROJAS**

In 1961, the Mexican government launched the Programa Nacional Fronterizo (PRONAF), or National Border Program. The program aimed to beautify border towns, build up their tourist infrastructure, and create favorable conditions for industrialization in the border region. The Border Industrialization Program (BIP), an outgrowth of PRONAF, established the border zone corridor of export processing industries known as maquiladoras in 1965 (Herzog 1990; Lorey 1999; Nevins 2002). Maquiladoras were the only firms exempt from Mexican law requiring majority Mexican ownership (Lorey 1999). The BIP also helped to fuel

significant migration to border cities from other parts of Mexico. In a 40-year period, between 1950 and 1990, the population of Mexican border states multiplied 3.6 times (Lorey 1999). Implemented in 1994, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the growing liberalization of the Mexican economy also facilitated a significant exodus from Mexico's countryside. From 1980 to 1990, for example, the amount of the country's population living in rural areas declined from 36 percent to 28 percent (Nevins 2002). In Tijuana, the population has grown by 70.5 percent to reach a total of 1,274,240 people in 2000 (Kopinak 2003).

Despite the rhetoric of a borderless global society, the border has become starker in this neoliberal context, which can be seen in strategies such as Operation Gatekeeper in San Diego and Operation Hold the Line in Texas. Migrants who intend to cross the border end up staying in border cities such as Tijuana. Furthermore, despite poor labor conditions, most of these migrant workers have little option but to seek employment in the maquiladoras run by transnational companies. Mexican border cities lack the necessary infrastructure to meet the housing, health care, and educational needs of the growing population of workers. Irasema Coronado (2006) has demonstrated that workers and their families who moved north in search of better employment opportunities frequently find themselves living in either the same or worse conditions than those they had hoped to escape. It is in this context from which Maclovio Rojas emerged. While colonias and the UPMs they inspire are not new to the border region, the conditions of Maclovio Rojas are unique in terms of who is interested in the land and the way in which the community has organized itself.

The community of Maclovio Rojas is one of the most recent and long-standing UPMs in Baja California, where neighborhoods such as Colonia Jardin, Colonia Libertad, Cartolandia, and Colonia Tierra y Libertad have a powerful history of uniting and organizing people to obtain a dignified way of life (Valenzuela-Arce 1991). Maclovio Rojas, located between the cities of Tijuana and Tecate and 30 miles south of the U.S./Mexico border, was founded by 25 families on April 10, 1988, on the anniversary of Emiliano Zapata's death. The community leaders and some of these initial families were members of an independent union of agricultural workers called the Central Independiente de Obreros Agrícolas y Campesinos (CIOAC), formed in the 1940s by Ramón Danzós Palomino, a member of the old Mexican Communist Party. According to Manuel Mancillas (2002), CIOAC was the first rural-based organization to challenge the official campesino organizations, which were then largely controlled by

the ruling party (the PRI) and the government. The CIOAC had a history of organizing migrant Mixteco<sup>2</sup> farm workers in the tomato fields in the state of Sinaloa, and in San Quintín, Baja California. Poblado Maclovio Rojas is named after Maclovio Rojas Marquéz, a CIOAC leader of Mixteco descent from Oaxaca who was killed in 1987 by a fellow organizer under orders from a frustrated grower. At the time of his death, Maclovio Rojas was the secretary of CIOAC in San Quintín. Therefore, this land movement and two others in Baja California were named in his honor (Mancillas 2002).

The land movement of Maclovio Rojas is rooted in the complicated history of agrarian reform and land tenure issues of Mexico (Mancillas 2002). When Lázaro Cárdenas came into power as president of Mexico in 1934, he set in place the institutional mechanisms necessary to redistribute land, a goal established by the Mexican Revolution and the Agrarian Reform Law (Article 27) of 1917. The Mexican poor were encouraged to solicit idle national lands for ejidos, the purpose of living and farming. Until the 1980s, most Mexicans believed that the Agrarian Reform Law made by Cárdenas was “irreversible and final” (William Cameron Townsend in Adler-Hellman 1994, 122). But in 1991, President Carlos Salinas de Gortari announced his proposal to amend Article 27 to permit the privatization of ejido land. The constitutional obligation to distribute land to qualified petitioners was immediately ended. Communal land would now be available for sale or rent to either Mexican or foreign companies (Adler-Hellman 1994). This move cleared the path for NAFTA, which gave multinational corporations the right to own Mexican land for profit at the expense of the racialized poor and landless Mexicans.

While these sorts of changes were taking place at the federal level, in 1989 (one year into the Maclovio Rojas land struggle), Ernesto Ruffo-Appel, a neoconservative from the PAN party, became governor of the state of Baja California. His first edict as governor was to endorse the “No Invasiones” (no invasions) campaign by warning people that he would no longer tolerate land occupations. Under his regime, the state government, not the federal government, would regulate land tenureship. Ruffo-Appel’s approach was to criminalize and discredit the leaders of these settlements by inventing the Crime of Instigating Forced Removal. This made being a leader of irregular settlements a crime (Lara 2003).

Maclovio Rojas was denied its communal land grant petition in 1989 and, over the last 20 years, the community and the state have been in a prolonged battle for the land. This has meant confronting repressive strategies imposed by the state government, including land invasions, and

living a life where there are no public services such as schools, electricity, or running water. Despite the legal wrangling involved, the community has continued to grow. There are currently over 2,000 families, all migrants from the Mexican nation who have traveled north in the post-NAFTA era. The community is divided into five subsections: There are block captains and section leaders who report to the central committee. Blocked by the ocean to the west, Tijuana's urban development projects are moving toward the east and toward Maclovio Rojas. Maquiladoras, such as Samsung, Hyundai, and Coca-Cola, surround the community. The planned Boulevard 2000 (a corridor with plans to connect San Diego, Rosarito, Tijuana, Tecate, and Mexicali) will run by the section of Las Vias, which is on the western side of the community.

Although informed by previous UPMs, the case of Maclovio Rojas is unique in that their quest for land is also guided by their assertion of autonomy. By the early 1990s, the leaders realized that the state was not going to provide their infrastructure, so they set out to create it for themselves. Essentially what Maclovianos argue is that necessity drove them to autonomy, not a political ideology. Instead, their need to have homes, roads, and schools for their children demanded that they take the task on themselves.

Apart from their homes, the residents have constructed two schools, a women's center, and a two-story cultural center called an Aguascalientes in the Zapatista<sup>3</sup> tradition. Many of the homes are made out of discarded garage doors and wood pallets, although newer houses are being erected out of cinder block and mortar. After years of having no electricity, the residents have created webs of electric lines that criss-cross the streets, streaming down from power poles that the government had installed on the streets for the maquiladoras but never were connected to their homes. They have also tapped into an aqueduct that carries water through the middle of their neighborhood to the nearby Samsung megaplant (Mancillas 2002). In summary, Maclovianos are confronting not only the state government but also the transnational companies interested in usurping their land. The story of Maclovio Rojas sheds light on the ways in which communities caught at the crux of First/Third World realities are responding to their predicament; indeed, it is in this unique context of the border that created the conditions for the politicization of women leaders.

## METHOD

Chicana feminist discourse (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983; Barrera 1991; Delgado-Gaitán 1993; Flores 2000; García 1989, 1997; Martínez 1996;



Russel y Rodríguez 1998) critiques cultural, political, and economic conditions in the United States. This theoretical framework embodies the goals of advocacy scholarship, which both challenges the claims of objectivity and links research to community concerns and social change. Chicana feminist discourse shapes both how I positioned myself in the field and my analysis of data. Elsewhere (Téllez 2005), I discuss how I use this framework in my research with more detail.

I conducted fieldwork in the community from September 2003 through September 2004, and again in the summer of 2006. Through participant observation, which entailed active involvement in the community's day-to-day activities (such as meetings, actions, and celebrations), extensive one-to-one interviews with 10 women residents (ranging from those who were actively involved in the struggle to those who were not, and from newer to older residents), and a follow-up focus group, I obtained the data that serve as the basis for this article. To complement the ethnographic material, I conducted archival research through local and national press coverage, court records, legal documents, community files, and other resources.

I place women at the center of analysis because the majority of the leadership and ranks are women. Indeed, I first came to the community as an activist who supported their movement and from this position made assumptions about the nature of women's roles within the community. That said, during the first week of my field research, I was met with a disconcerting incident. One of the movement's leading organizers was being beaten by her husband, and I was asked to intervene. I felt powerless and was deeply affected by the situation, yet did not have the language to understand the contradictions of women leading a social movement when they remain subjugated in their home lives.

While my open-ended, unstructured interview questions centered on how the women had arrived at Maclovio Rojas, what their experiences with the community had been, and the nature of their roles as women in the community, it became strikingly clear through their narratives that the subject of personal violence could not be ignored. Thus as I began listening to the narratives, and las mujeres discussed their roles in fighting for their homes, their land, and the community's projects, I began to see the ways in which Maclovianas have learned to carefully navigate, and respond to, the violence that they face both in their homes and from the state and transnational companies. Of the final 10 women interviewed, three shared what they described as a mutual supporting relationship, whether married or living in "union libre" (living together, not legally married), and five had left their partners/husbands as a result of the physical violence they experienced at their hands.

Juana<sup>4</sup>, Maria, Hortensia, Alma, and Dora all work, to varying degrees, in the comité; Teresa, Luz, and Elizabeth all settled on the lands during the community's first year; Sylvia and Paula own restaurants in the community. None had previously been involved in a land movement, a workers' union, or any type of community-based campaign before arriving to Maclovio Rojas. Their ages ranged from 26 to 60; two had no children and five had small children still in the home.

## LAS MUJERES DE MACLOVIO

### Active Actors Against the Neoliberal State

Residents argue that the "lucha," or struggle, of Maclovio Rojas has always belonged to the women, that they are the ones "al frente," or in front. Community leader, Hortensia, says, "I think that in Maclovio Rojas, 80 percent of the struggle has been moved forward by women." Some believe that women are in front because they are "mas entronas," or more daring, while others feel that the women's realm is more closely connected to the home, so their responsibility as women is to defend it. As Sylvia passionately articulates, "If someone tries to remove me from here, it's obvious that I will fight with teeth and nails because otherwise where am I going to take my children?!" But beyond the women being "more daring" or simply seeing their activism as an extension of their responsibilities to the home, Maclovianas recognize the larger impact of their work. For example, Dora states,

It's big, you have a huge commitment to the people. . . To be a part of this movement, it requires a lot of time, dedication, character, foundation, discipline, education, and if you don't have an education; then you must have practice and notions of understanding how big this is. You can't stop trying to improve yourself, to move forward. . . Leaders of social movements think about the well-being of the people. The government is corrupted but not here [in Maclovio Rojas], here the people contribute for themselves, and for those of us who get involved even more deeply, we give it all without expecting anything in return.

Juana adds,

To live in an autonomous community, it's both difficult and you're full of pride at the same time. Difficult because you don't have the necessary services and pride because when people come from somewhere else, they're

impressed with what we are doing with our projects—schools, child care center, etc.—without the help of the government and that’s when I realize, wow, it’s true we have come far. But it’s hard because sometimes we need water, we need electricity.

As they experience and witness the repression imposed by the state, a political analysis emerges. For example, residents are well aware of the fate of another UPM in Baja California, *Puertos al Futuro*. In the summer of 2002, the Tijuana municipal government carried out a very controversial program of destroying substandard, irregular housing. 250 to 300 houses in the colonia *Puertos al Futuro* were demolished and 500 people were left homeless by the demolitions (Kopinak 2003).

In Maclovio Rojas, the government has also threatened to physically evict the community on a number of occasions. Luz explains the community’s precarious position: “There are a lot of interests that the government has here. The lands have a lot of value so we have more problems with them because they want to build state housing or factories here.” The reality of the repressive pressure placed by the government is reflected in the various stories shared by the residents. In 1998, local police forcefully tried to take over the homes of several residents, and as residents defended their homes with their bodies, other residents began dragging furniture onto the highway, blocking traffic and causing severe disruption. Eventually the local police were called off but instances such as these have been common for Maclovio Rojas residents. Teresa concludes, “We’ve had some fights, some struggles. . . It wouldn’t cost the government much to come and beat up the people.”

Because physical threats of removal did not completely put an end to land movements in Baja California, the introduction of Article 226 in 2002 to the penal code (which makes land occupation [*despojo*] illegal) has created a constant stream of lawsuits against the community leaders and residents. When a community resident or leader is charged with *despojo*, the police immediately seek an arrest warrant. The judicial system in Mexico works on the principle that one is guilty until proven innocent. If a claim is made against an individual and they have not sought an *amparo* (which is almost like a bond, but literally means “protection of a right”), they are subject to immediate arrest. Sometimes “*amparos*” are not allowed and defendants, if caught, have to wait in jail until their case is resolved. CESPT, the department of water and power in Tijuana, has also begun to file charges against residents for the alleged stealing of untreated water from the aqueduct. With over 42 charges of “*despojo*” currently looming over several residents, some leaders are defendants in multiple cases, scrambling to and from court appearances and meetings with lawyers.

The disruptive cycle of these lawsuits creates an insidious but subtle wave of repression through not only the creation of fear, but also by disturbing the everyday lives of those that have been charged. For example, on one of my many visits to the courthouse, the plaintiff did not show up to the hearing, and all 14 residents who had appeared wasted yet another day of their lives tangled up in a legal mess of confusion. I drove Luz, who is being targeted for despojo, and another family there, and on our way back we talked about how this case is taking a lot of time away from their personal lives. When someone is amparado/a, like Luz, they have to sign in weekly as a form of probation. Furthermore, these lawsuits have served as a justification for sending troops into the Maclovio Rojas community to arrest leaders and cause general intimidation.

The biggest "golpe," or hit, to the community came in 2002, which drove two prominent leaders, Artemio and Hortensia, out and into hiding and put two others, Juan and Nico, in jail. The golpe of 2002 is critical to the community's historical memory—more so, of course, for Hortensia, whose visible leadership role has made her the target of multiple attacks from the government. She has felt the brunt of repression personally in the form of arrest warrants, persecution, and imprisonment. She states, "My house was surrounded by police as if I was the worst or best drug trafficker but they didn't get me because they couldn't at the time." Governmental tactics are not hidden and Hortensia clearly explains that

The government can't do what they did in Puertos al Futuro. . .they already tried, the last time was in 1998 and the tractors came and everything. . .the people opposed it and put themselves in front of the machines and defended their lands against the police. They know we will defend and there will be deaths, so instead they subtly take over by creating lawsuits.

Not only do state economic policies reflect collusion with transnational companies, but their actions directly demonstrate preference for them. In the late 1990s, Hyundai Corporation was able to take over a portion of the land belonging to Maclovio Rojas after a stand-off between the residents and the company. The state government did not contest legal ownership once it was out of the hands of the residents. Several storage trucks belonging to Hyundai now line the eastern border of the community. Furthermore, the other surrounding maquiladoras also "illegally" tap into the aqueduct, but no suits have been filed against them. As Hortensia argues,

There are millions of dollars at stake. We are in a strategic point where the Boulevard 2000 is going to pass and the interests of the transnational companies

are there. Since we are an organized community we serve as a bad example because we might wake the consciousness of the people.

But the consciousness of the residents of Maclovio Rojas has been awakened. This is apparent when Dora says,

The government doesn't like Maclovio Rojas because it is an example for other communities. The governor gets paid to build schools and here our payment has been made by the sacrifice of the people. The government doesn't want other communities to know, from our example, that they too can organize themselves. Why would we need governors or presidents then if the people came together to organize?

These narratives illustrate that when forced to confront the structural violence endemic to the border region, residents point to an alternative, one that challenges the gendered and racialized sociopolitical position in which they find themselves. Arguably, the residents of Maclovio Rojas came together because they simply needed a place to live. Indeed, the women described the hardships of migration, instability, and uncertainty they endured before settling on these lands. On arriving and finding the neoliberal state resistant to their rights to the land, the women emerged as leaders, and they fought back. Over the years, it became clear to them that if they needed something completed, they needed to take it on themselves to do it.

In the process, a critique of the state and the transnational companies, the same ones that employ them, materialized. Seeing themselves as political subjects allows them to recognize that they have the power to enact change.

Hortensia states,

Look at my case. I'm being persecuted as a social justice fighter when I should be given respect from the government as a citizen, wife, daughter; my rights are being taken away, I'm being affected. But I'm strong even though I am still being followed, we just have to move forward.

Hortensia's final thoughts about moving forward despite their situation are representative of the community at large. Paula reiterates this when she says, "This is not just me, it's all of us. We all have the same fears that they might drive us out or whatever but we all have the same fear, not just me." The notion of being unified is extremely important to the survival of the organization, the community, and the *lucha*.

## Transforming the Home

As these women solidify their commitment to the struggle for their land in Maclovio Rojas, they are also committing themselves to a lifestyle that demands justice in all aspects of their lives. There is a well-known "dicho," a saying, in Maclovio Rojas: If a woman comes to Maclovio Rojas married, she divorces, and if she arrives single she will find a partner. This common practice in the community illustrates that a discord in traditional family life occurs when the women develop a political consciousness through their critical engagement with the state and transnational companies. This becomes most apparent when the women negotiate their experiences of violence within the home.

Of the 10 women with whom I spoke, five made the decision to leave their partners based on their experiences of violence and humiliation. All argue that becoming more deeply involved in the movement created schisms within their homes. Accusations of infidelity were common as women attended marches, rallies, and meetings. The women argue, however, that *being* involved in the movement allowed them to *see* that they did not have to remain in the violent situation they were in at home. The borderlands concept highlights the ways both the private and public spheres become politicized spaces for the women.

For example, Maria states,

I was having problems with my husband. He felt like I abandoned our home, our children, my responsibilities with them. He was always negative because he never understood the *lucha*, and I say never because we've been separated now for four months and he has actually left the community never really understanding what was going on, or the work that I do. He left talking bad about the community, the organization, saying that because of the organization he lost his family; because of the organization he lost it all. I feel that it's easy to understand because even my youngest son understands and lives this experience with me and he wants to support something that my husband didn't do.

Maria made the decision to separate from her husband and chose, instead, to continue her work within the movement.

In the end, well, maybe you could say it was a bad decision but my values wouldn't let me leave, feelings of responsibility and solidarity. . . and I didn't want to abandon the organization at such a critical time. Besides being a member of the organization, I am a community member, I have property here and so my obligation is to support the movement. If I had left, my conscience

wouldn't have let me be in peace with myself. I knew it wasn't the time, if I hadn't done it earlier when maybe I could've saved my marriage, then later just wasn't the appropriate time to leave, I was too deeply involved. . . .I don't get as stressed out because my husband's attitude always affected me negatively. The way he spoke to me ruined my thought processes, and now that I'm alone with the kids, it's better, they understand that if I have to go to a meeting or if there's a protest it's my obligation to the community. . .they understand that at that moment I can't be with them.

Maria describes the tension felt in the relationship she has with her children, husband, and the movement. Her sense of obligation to all three areas of her life never waned. It is evident that what she is articulating is that she needed reciprocity in all three relationships, which she was able to receive from her young children and members of her community. Her husband failed to see the need to understand and instead reacted with more violence. Once Maria made the decision to leave him, she never looked back.

Although *las mujeres* admit that their experiences have been painful, they also describe the process as a liberating one, that the movement helped them "open their minds." Juana says,

We're facing the government and it's a huge thing, no es cualquier cosa (it's no small feat), and I think you get more strength from that—even if you don't want to, because before I wasn't interested. But now by being involved in the movement you are influenced because you see the government committing so many injustices, such as salary inequalities and such. They run all over people! Here we're just trying to get ahead for our families. . .and one starts realizing more as you get more involved and as women we cannot permit this and our minds start to open up. When you start understanding more, then that's where our freedom starts. Maclovio has helped us to move forward, to face new challenges, goals, and obstacles. We have advanced both a little bit and a lot. We need to do away with the barrier called machismo.

Despite her initial disinterest in politics, Juana, through her experiences, can now articulate a critique of the state and recognizes the injustices that are imposed on workers and on the poor in general. When given the opportunity to develop a critique of the state, it is inevitable for the women to begin to critically examine their own lives. As the women draw connections between the violence imposed by the state and the violence lived in the home, political consciousness creates a fury that motivates them to act to live more "freely" and without fear. Juana says, "Before I was scared of my husband and slowly I started defending myself; you're not going to believe it, but I did and from my last child until now I don't have the same fear."

Those women who were more actively involved in the movement and made the decision to split from their partners were the ones who then created safe spaces to support each other financially, emotionally, and with childrearing. While victimization, abuse, and, in the case of two women, death at the hands of their live-in partners/husbands, all still occur in Maclovio Rojas, mechanisms in place there demonstrate that women's roles are being reconsidered. Single women are given priority for land, and wives/mothers are usually given official titles to the land, a practice that is uncommon in Mexico. Furthermore, the Casa de la Mujer, the women's center, constructed in 2002, provides childcare and some workshops for women residents of Maclovio Rojas. A statue of Coatlique (the Mesoamerican goddess of life, death, and rebirth) was erected in the front of the center, a symbolic homage to women and recognition that there are needs women have that only such a center can fulfill. Juana says, "All of us that are working and supporting here are women, and it gives you security about yourself that you don't need much from your partner so that you can make it on your own."

Despite this support, the leaders argue that they are unable to move the Casa de la Mujer forward because their energies are consumed with the immediate struggle for land. Clearly, women are still responsible for the tasks accorded to them historically: housework, childrearing, and all functions within the family. Thus while it is clear that in Maclovio Rojas, women are the defenders of homes (in fact, they are the ones who attend the rallies, the marches, and the protests, and are the ones who confront the police or other invaders if necessary), this historical prototype hasn't changed. And although the call to feminism has not been made (indeed, I never once heard the women, not even the leaders, use *femenista* as a descriptor of themselves), their actions demonstrate a woman-centered subjectivity that has been engendered by their experiences. It is useful to look at Milagros Pena's (2007) research on women's NGOs in El Paso/Ciudad Juarez where the activists defined *feminismo* as "fe-en-mi-misma" or faith in myself.

Similarly, many of the women feel that they have become "otra," a stronger woman, and feel that because of their ability to defend their homes they can defend themselves in their personal lives as well. Paula states,

I've learned to defend myself so that they [the government] don't take what is ours. These lands are mine and just because the government wants them doesn't mean they can take them away from me. I will defend them because I value everything that I have here.



Teresa says that she's learned

to be more courageous, I'm not scared of the government anymore. I can defend myself because in the beginning you do get scared but as time passes you learn more, you have more love toward what you have and you even start getting more angry. I feel good helping my community.

Maria talks about what she has learned most from living and working in the community:

I used to be very scared of Juan and I'm not anymore, I know how to confront him now. Not only am I a representative of the community but I am responsible for my children, and their security is always going to be first. So that means that I can't be scared of anything, I have to have more confidence in myself.

Juana shares what she values most in Maclovio Rojas:

I've gained a lot of confidence being here, a lot of self-confidence, *yo sola valirme por mi misma* (to be self-reliant) with my children, and I have learned that by myself I can get ahead. If I would have lived in another community, I wouldn't have been involved in sit-ins and marches, etc., in another place this wouldn't happen.

For many Maclovianas, the journey to have a little plot of land has been a long and arduous one. And, at the time of this writing, the struggle is certainly not over. But what we can learn from the case of Maclovio Rojas is that when mujeres fronterizas are faced with the kind of gendered, class-based, and racialized structural violence that is endemic to the border region, they respond with what can be described as a gut instinct for survival. Through their experiences, though, they develop an oppositional consciousness that critiques the neoliberal state while simultaneously, especially for those more involved in the movement, developing a woman-centered subjectivity that provides them with the tools they need to create different choices for themselves.

## CONCLUSION

Chandra Mohanty argues that any analysis of the effects of globalization needs to centralize the experiences and struggles of communities of women and girls from the "two/third world"; that it is "precisely the

potential epistemic privilege of poor women of color that opens up the space for demystifying capitalism and for envisioning transborder social and economic justice" (2003, 250). And as Bhavnani, Foran, and Kurian (2003) and others have demonstrated, women in developing countries have actively played a role in confronting their predicaments and taking part in collective movements for change. Escobar adds that "local groups, far from being passive receivers of the transnational condition, actively shape the process of constructing identities, social relations and economic practice" (2001, 155).

Because constraints faced by women may not only be political but also cultural and familial (Moghadam 2001), the case of Maclovio Rojas offers an important intervention in the study of social movements, in particular those at the U.S./Mexico border, where transnational and neoliberal politics, capitalism, patriarchy, and racialization create unique conditions. Furthermore, it illustrates the gendered nuances of activism such that while the goal of Maclovio Rojas is its struggle for land, an important byproduct is the woman-centered political consciousness that emerges. Maclovianas gain the capacity to self-determine their lives.

Using the borderlands concept to describe the ways Maclovianas navigate these social spheres helps us to further understand and problematize the dichotomous notions of Chicana/Latina/Mexicana activism. While Diaz-Barriga (1998) argues that women activists blur the distinction between the domestic and the public spheres, an analysis of the narratives of the women from Maclovio Rojas builds on Pardo's (1998) study, where she highlights that political participation relies on the relationship between the public and the private spheres. Maclovianas' oppositional consciousness is directed *simultaneously* at the neoliberal state and at the unequal relationships they experience within their home, both being sociopolitical structures that condone violence. Maclovianas are not trying to be liberated from the private sphere; in fact, they are defending their homes and themselves. As such, they are transforming social relations and the cultural meanings attached to them.

Smith (2005) has argued that interventions to address state violence and interpersonal violence need to be developed simultaneously. Maclovianas demonstrate that both spaces are highly political, and a call such as Smith's needs to be heeded, if at a larger scale. The focus on women's agency in this article offers important insight into a region where most see only femicide, exploitation, or victimization. The concept of gendered borderlands aptly fits into the ways Maclovianas are negotiating their conditions but also highlight the ways they brought and continue to bring new meaning to the U.S./Mexico border.

A possibility for future research is to examine the narratives of men in the community to provide more breadth to the analysis and to learn more about their negotiations with women and the change they are living. The work of Kimmel (1987) outlines the ways men responded to feminism at the turn of the nineteenth century, which I find largely still applicable today, particularly in Maclovio Rojas.<sup>5</sup> As anthropologist Alejandro Lugo argues, “when a sole feminist analyst examines, comprehensively, both men and women, new and productive categories of theoretical analysis and politics can emerge” (2000, 55). While some of the organizers and residents were able to find support in their interpersonal relationships and a setting that allowed the women to evolve both within and outside of their home, the more common outcome, especially for those actively involved in the struggle, was a break. Thus, by creating safe spaces for themselves and for their families, these *mujeres fronterizas* have taken an oppositional stance toward the state, the transnational companies, and patriarchy, proving that change in all aspects of a woman’s life is possible.

To conclude, I’ll leave you with this quote from Maria, whose words remind me of the urgency of their struggle: “We have the right to live how we want to live, we have the right to live decently, and we can’t wait for them to bring it to us—we have to fight for it.”

## NOTES

1. While the literature on social movements offers a paradigm for understanding the ways in which people mobilize for collective action and the strategies and motivations for doing so (Castells 1983; Cohen and Rai 2000; Melucci 1989), these works largely fail to include a gender analysis, a project that Taylor begins to address. Taylor (1999) argues that gender is an explanatory factor in the emergence, nature, and outcomes of all social movements, even those that do not evoke the language of gender conflict or explicitly embrace gender change. She asks us to look at the “gender regime” of the institutional context to understand the broader set of political constraints and opportunities that impinge on social movements. Building on this work, Einwohner, Hollander, and Olsen (2000) add that social movements are gendered by their composition and goals.

2. Refers to members of an indigenous population in Mexico, many of whom do not speak Spanish and do not identify as Mestizo.

3. In August of 1994, the Zapatistas convened a National Democratic Convention to open a national dialogue with “civil society.” To host the 6,000 people, the Zapatistas built an “auditorium” that they called an Aguascalientes, evoking the Convention held in that city of Central Mexico during the Revolution of 1910. Several more appeared throughout the communities in resistance. In

August of 2003, the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN) announced the closure of the Aguascalientes and the opening of the Caracoles which will be the "Casas" de la Junta de Buen Gobierno (literally translated means "homes of assembly of the good government").

4. As president of the community, and because of her very visible public persona, Hortensia's name has not been changed, all others are pseudonyms.

5. Kimmel suggests three alternative strategies for the reconstitution of gender: (1) antifeminist, which created a frightened retreat to traditional configurations; (2) the demarcation of new institutional spheres for the vigorous assertion of a renewed masculinity; and (3) men's support for feminist claims.

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