Media Geographies in the Oaxacan Uprising:
Documenting the People’s Guelaguetza

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Soy Zapoteco.
Tu has querido negar mi existencia [...] 
Yo nací para ser hermano de mis hermanos pero
Esclavo a nadie.
Nosotros luchamos para todos. Nosotros sembramos para todos.
Mi voz celebrará el cielo y se unirá con tu voz y mas y
Juntos gritaremos: Somos Zapotecos!

I am Zapotec.
You have wanted to deny my existence [...] 
I was born to be brother to my brother
And a slave to no one.
We struggle for all. We plant for all.
My voice will celebrate the sky and it will join with you and more.
Together we will shout: We are Zapotec!

Poem from the People’s Guelaguetza: Oaxacans Take it to the Streets
(Bishop and Cravey 2007)

Media geographies inspired People’s Guelaguetza: Oaxacans Take it to the Streets.
In Oaxaca’s central marketplace in summer 2006, call-in commentary on Sit-In Radio
(Radio Plantón) wafted through the air and, from time-to-time, people stopped what
they were doing to listen intently to a compelling narrative. Woman-run Saucepan
Radio (Radio Cacerola) blared from taxis as they navigated to the edges of the
permanently barricaded central city. And, over a period of weeks, University Radio
(Radio Universidad) slowly brought the city to a boil with the calm voice of la doctora
alerting neighborhoods or institutions when they might need to prepare themselves for paramilitary attack on a certain evening.

Visual imagery also exploded with urgency in the city, providing alternative epistemologies of power (Hillis 1999). Throughout the summer, newspaper photos and stories hung from zigzagged twine throughout the insurgent zocalo. Meanwhile, tourists and other shoppers passed over clothing vendors in favor of a ten peso ($1) DVD that was selling faster than the famed Oaxacan rugs and pottery. Crowds gathered to watch the DVD’s violent moving images wherever vendors were selling it. The chaotic bloody scenes were captivating: hundreds of police officers with clubs and a helicopter shooting teargas into crowded city streets where teachers were sleeping during a prolonged, peaceful sit-in. Those who came under attack captured the extraordinary state-sponsored violence using cell phone videocams and quickly edited DVDs of the failed desalojo (eviction). While Governor Luis Ruiz Ortiz’s June 14 attack was certainly newsworthy, it was never broadcast on television until some six weeks later when women of Oaxaca seized the public television station. As we document in the video, the women’s first priority was to confront the governor’s impunity and use the airwaves to broadcast the violent images throughout the mostly rural and isolated state.

Media geographies of the political struggle included every type of creative expression imaginable – from parades and mega-marches, to music and dancing, to street theater, to banners and murals, to fine art and crafts. The city exploded in riotous self-expression over the summer, and the insurgent zones became so large and pervasive that the governor found it impossible to appear in public because he was held responsible for the June 14 attack, as well as the targeted paramilitary raids on activists, their low-powered radio stations, their offices, and their homes. Popular Assemblies of the Peoples of Oaxaca (APPO) activists took over government buildings one-by-one, claiming the city and its public spaces for the citizens, and creating an alternative governing structure. Graffiti throughout the city shouted asesino (assassin) and caricatured politicians holding bags of Guelaguetza tourism money on their way to make deposits in Swiss bank accounts. The synergy of these various media communications transformed unfathomable events into real, believable, and actionable ones for a period of time in Oaxaca.

Our video, of course, involved other networks of media geographies (Dixon and Zonn 2004). We interviewed local teachers, students, artists, a tamale vendor, and APPO activists in order to share these local stories with international audiences who were getting Associated Press stories that, for example, characterized the protestors as “urban guerrillas.” Mainstream accounts likewise said little, if anything, about the state-sponsored violence, or the hopes and goals of the protestors. Our film has aired in classrooms, film festivals, scholarly meetings, and public libraries. Some of the most potent moments in our documentary involve simple oral communication strategies.
such as the young girl declaiming the poem “I am Zapotec” (above) in a spine-
ingling voice that blasts out from the stage and fills the arena during the "People’s
Guelaguetza". Exclaiming“I was born to be a brother to my brother, and a slave to
no one”, the enduring strength and resistance of the Oaxacan people is palpable. The
poetry, and its forceful delivery, speaks to decolonial discourse as well as the values and
the goals of the uprising (Mignolo 2005).

In closing, it is important to mention the Guelaguetza itself. For generations,
distinct indigenous groups from various parts of the state have come together to
perform and exchange traditional dances and celebrate pre-Hispanic ties of mutual
interdependence in this annual event. An alternative, popular Guelaguetza in 2006
was a triumphant moment for APPO and teacher’s union activists. In a rebuke to
the governor who cancelled the official Guelaguetza, they organized a “People’s
Guelaguetza” attended by more than 20,000 tourists, journalists, and Oaxacan
residents. Unlike the highly commercialized, government-sponsored Guelaguetza of
recent years, in which international and domestic tourists paid up to $50 for the best
seats, the event was absolutely free-of-charge. In order to have a large performance
space for the alternative Guelaguetza, teachers and APPO activists used acetylene
torches in the early morning hours to burn through and open the gates of the Instituto
Technologico. In this way, APPO asserted control over public space and expanded beyond
the zocalo, the barricaded streets, the public airwaves, and government buildings.
On the day of the Guelaguetza, public performance and the participation of various
regional groups became a way to link with, and expand to, remote villages throughout
the state. In this way, public spaces themselves were a medium of power and political
struggle (Marston 1988). 3

Endnotes
1 More than 300 civil society groups came together to form APPO in response to the June 14 attack.
2 New York City-based journalist Brad Will was also inspired to videotape the Oaxaca uprising.
Killed while filming on October 28, 2006, his final tape was posted to the Indymedia website
shortly after his death and circulated to viewers around the world within hours. His death, and
media attention to it, forced President Fox of Mexico to act decisively in his last few weeks of
public office and send federal police to Oaxaca in an attempt to quell the uprising.
3 For more information on the struggle in Oaxaca in English see the Narco News Bulletin,
especially postings of Nancy Davies. For more information about the making of our film see
the article in 2007 Endeavors.
REFERENCES