



Vol. 9, No. 2, Winter 2012, 134-169

www.ncsu.edu/acontracorriente

Representations of Violence in Testimonies of the Campesino Movement in Veracruz

Elissa Rashkin

Universidad Veracruzana

Habrá de dispensar, señor, que yo vaya a llorar...
—Francisco Salmerón, “La tonal del ‘Comisariado’”

In his study of twentieth-century agrarianism *Los herederos de Zapata: Movimientos campesinos posrevolucionarios en México*, sociologist Armando Bartra points to the 1920s as the beginning of a process in which the struggle for agrarian reform, central to the Revolution yet incomplete and even truncated in its wake, continued in a new context.¹ Responding to John Womack’s famous characterization of Emiliano Zapata and his followers as “country people who did not want to move and therefore got into a revolution,” he writes, “perhaps at first the campesinos rebelled because they did not want change, but once they got started, they decided

¹ Armando Bartra, *Los herederos de Zapata: Movimientos campesinos posrevolucionarios en México* (México, DF: Era, 1985), 16. This and subsequent translations are mine.

to change everything.”² Bartra continues, “with the revolution, the campesino sector created, above all, a new political space [...] If the avatars and frustrations of institutional agrarianism express the defeat of the Zapatista revolution, revolutionary agrarianism is associated, in the campesino consciousness, with the need for a new and authentic revolution.”³ Thus, during the 1920s and beyond, the agrarian struggle unfolded within a context that included official legitimacy via the 1917 Constitution, but also radical action outside of official spheres in an atmosphere of constant risk, betrayal and violence.

Given the contradictory nature of postrevolutionary agrarianism, with its oscillation between State cooptation and manipulation on the one hand and violent and often futile resistance on the other, some scholars have questioned its assumed centrality as an historical phenomenon and object of study, and have sought to shift the focus to more subtle grass-roots and “everyday” acts of rebellion and negotiation. James C. Scott, anthropologist whose ideas have influenced Mexican historiography in recent decades, observes in *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* that peasant rebellions, in spite of their dramatic appeal to historians, have more often than not produced devastatingly negative outcomes:

To be sure, even a failed revolt may achieve something: a few concessions from the state or landlords, a brief respite from new and painful relations of production and, not least, a memory of resistance and courage that may lie in wait for the future. Such gains, however, are uncertain, while the carnage, the repression, and the demoralization and defeat are all too certain and real.⁴

In the case of postrevolutionary Veracruz, the agrarian movement was not an isolated revolt, but rather a long process of struggle, negotiation and reaccommodation that decisively affected the physical, social, political and cultural landscape of the region. If we consider Scott’s remarks in relation to agrarianism in Veracruz and in particular to the “campesino consciousness” outlined by Bartra, two elements would seem to be

² John Womack, *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1969), ix; Bartra, *Los herederos*, 15.

³ Bartra, *Los herederos*, 15.

⁴ James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1985), 29.

particularly pertinent: on the one hand, the “carnage and repression” that this struggle involved, and on the other, the “memory of resistance and courage” that it produced, a memory fundamental in the construction and reconstruction of campesino identity. The question that arises is: given the extremely violent nature of the land reform struggle in the region, how has its violence been remembered, represented and made meaningful? In what ways has the experience of violence contributed to creating a collective “memory of resistance and courage” that is at once heroic and ambivalent?

While studies of campesino activism in Veracruz have focused primarily on aspects such as leadership, political events and quantitative outcomes, historical artifacts suggest the importance of representation as an area of investigation. In particular, the omnipresence of violence is strikingly apparent in the testimonial literature of the *agrarista* movement. It would seem that there were few agrarian communities where the conflict between landowners and campesinos did not create victims; and in their testimonies, survivors often present the violence as an implacable force that came to characterize an entire stage of their history. Their attempts to make sense of the experience and reconstruct it as narrative include elements of what performance theorist Joseph Roach calls *surrogation*, a process of cultural reproduction in which “Into the cavities created by loss through death or other forms of departure [...] survivors attempt to fit satisfactory alternates.”⁵ Rather than a literal substitution, groups reinvent their past and its violence, selectively remembering and forgetting in order to create or recreate collective identities that may, however ambivalently, sustain them into the future.

In the pages that follow, I examine various texts produced in and around the agrarian movement in order to explore the impact of violence on the formation and transformation of campesino identities and the collective memory of this struggle, decisive in the history of the region.

⁵ Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 2. While Roach is neither a Mexicanist nor an agrarian scholar, in *Cities of the Dead* he looks at questions of conquest, intercultural encounter, race, slavery and other phenomena important to the Americas through the lens of performance, an approach I find provocative and useful to the present project. For a related discussion of performance studies in Latin America, see Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

Beginning with accounts produced during the 1920s within the Liga de Comunidades Agrarias del Estado de Veracruz, in which the figure of the martyr played a constant and important role, I go on to examine a selection of later testimonies in which violence tints the memory of each witness, creating silences as well as painful recollections. I then look at the literary interpretation presented in Francisco Salmerón's *Testimonios del Tecuán*, a collection of short stories published in 1960. I conclude with some thoughts on violence as a factor in the historical construction of the *agrарista* experience.⁶

The Agrarista Martyrology

The agrarian struggle in Veracruz emerged toward the end of the Mexican Revolution out of a situation of profound inequality and oppression. Before the Revolution of 1910-1920, Veracruz's indigenous communities (in zones such as Papantla in the north and Acayucan in the south) had often resisted the theft of their communal lands by large haciendas and foreign companies, but nearly always without success. During the Porfiriato, the region's landowners were able to expand their domains by manipulating the law and used the rural police forces to maintain their power.⁷ This tie between property owners and the State weakened with the Revolution; the agrarian law of 1915, proclaimed by Venustiano Carranza in order to win peasant support and weaken the rival factions led by Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa, opened the way to land reform, and in fact some communities began to negotiate the restitution or endowment of lands from that early date.⁸ Due to the enormous disparities

⁶ An early version of this article was presented at the 2010 Congress of the Latin American Studies Association, Toronto, Canada, October 6- 9, 2010. It also forms part of a larger project on identity and representation in the campesino movement in Veracruz. I thank Emily Hind and Antoni Castells for their comments and Homero Ávila Landa for ongoing discussion and feedback.

⁷ For recent perspectives on land issues in nineteenth-century Veracruz, see Carmen Blázquez Domínguez (coord.), *Tierra y poder en Veracruz. De la colonización a la posrevolución* (Xalapa: Arana Editores, 2009).

⁸ *Restitución* referred to the restoring of lands to their rightful owners, explicitly acknowledging an earlier theft. However, most successful land grants, even if solicited in terms of *restitución*, were approved in the form of *dotación* or endowment, often utilizing government-owned lands: that is, gifts from a benevolent, paternalist State rather than rectification of past wrongs. Some indigenous communities, however, demanded and won restitution of their

of power that continued to exist between campesinos and landowners, however, little redistribution of land was carried out during these years.

At the beginning of the 1920s, radical activists including Úrsulo Galván, Manuel Almanza, José Cardel, José Fernández Oca, Carolino Anaya, Sóstenes Blanco, Isauro Acosta and others began to organize in the countryside, calling for the changes that the Revolution had promised in theory but had not delivered in practice. Some of these men had been displaced from their rural communities of origin by the Revolution and, as urban workers, had encountered the radical teachings brought by European anarchists and communists to the port of Veracruz and other cities and industrial centers. Through their involvement in labor struggles and popular social movements they gained experience and knowledge that they hoped to apply to the difficult project of rural organizing.⁹ Led by these radical activists, the state's campesinos, some of whom worked as day laborers on ranches and haciendas, while others rented and cultivated small plots principally for their own subsistence, began to organize and demand the redistribution of land. Even though their demands were protected by law, they were violently resisted by landowners, who formed private militias, or *guardias blancas*, in order to suppress the organizing efforts of rural workers and derail any attempt at expropriation. The federal army, led in large part by generals who were or had become owners of extensive estates, tended to defend the interests of the *hacendados*.

In 1920, in a climate of rising tensions, Colonel Adalberto Tejeda was elected governor. Tejeda's radical program, and especially his agrarian

ancestral territories. On this subject and its myriad complications on the local level see, for instance, Ana María Serna, *Manuel Peláez y la vida rural en la Faja de Oro. Petróleo, revolución y sociedad en el norte de Veracruz, 1910-1928* (México: Instituto Mora, 2008); Emilia Velázquez Hernández, *Territorios fragmentados. Estado y comunidad indígena en el istmo veracruzano* (Mexico, DF: CIESAS, 2006), 241-282; Ivonne Carrillo Dewar, "La lucha por la tierra de las comunidades indígenas en el norte de Veracruz. Notas para una reconstrucción histórica," in *Agraristas y agrarismo*, coord. Olivia Domínguez Pérez (Xalapa: Gobierno del Estado de Veracruz, 1992), 159-181; or from the same text, Daniel Buckles and Jacques Chevalier, "Ejido versus bienes comunales: historia política de Pajapan," 231-247, among others.

⁹ Galván, Almanza and Blanco were particularly active in the renters' movement led by anarchist Herón Proal, which organized urban tenants (mostly women, including many prostitutes) against the abuses of exploitative landlords. See Andrew Grant Wood, *Revolution in the Street: Women, Workers, and Urban Protest in Veracruz, 1870-1927* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 2001).

reform project, provoked conflicts with President Álvaro Obregón; but when many high-ranking military officers turned against Obregón during the Delahuertista rebellion of 1923-1924, Tejeda not only remained loyal to the central government but also organized brigades of workers and campesinos to combat the military rebels and their regional allies, the landowners. In this way the campesino movement acquired the weapons and political legitimacy it needed in order to become one of the most important political forces in the state over the next decade.

As the organized peasantry gained power, landowners, urban elites and the federal government pressured the state government demanding the disarmament of the campesinos; the “pacification of the countryside,” as it was called in the press, implied the suppression of the *agraristas*, yet Governor Tejeda upheld the right of the latter to defend themselves against the campaign of violence carried out by the *guardias blancas*. Thus the creation of the *ejidos*, violently resisted by property owners, was guaranteed by the state government and the force of arms, not without generating an infinite number of conflicts on the local level.

In the struggle for the land, a considerable number of campesinos lost their lives. Rafael Ortega, witness and participant in other social movements of the era, observes: “If a person were to be diligent enough to examine one by one the voluminous agrarian files stored in the archives of the state government of Veracruz, he would be surprised at the sheer number of campesino lives sacrificed in the struggle for the acquisition of land.”¹⁰ The Liga de Comunidades Agrarias del Estado de Veracruz (LCAEV) was founded on March 23, 1923, at the initiative of Galván, Almanza, and other regional organizers with direct support from Governor Tejeda. Its foundation at that moment was linked to a notorious act of violence that had happened just a few weeks earlier: the dispute between agraristas and landowners in Puente Nacional, in which several people were killed. The participation of the state civil guard in defense of the campesinos provoked a strong reaction from the central government, which

¹⁰ Leafar Agetro (Rafael Ortega), *Las luchas proletarias en Veracruz. Historia y autocrítica* (Xalapa: Barricada, 1942), 103.

blamed Tejeda for inflaming tensions in the state.¹¹ The Liga's founding was thus a bold gesture of support for the campesinos on the part of the Tejeda administration, and at the same time represented the culmination of years of organization in rural communities, especially in the central area of the state.¹²

The uprising that broke out at the end of the year led by finance minister and former president Adolfo de la Huerta was, at the national level, an act of opposition to the Obregón government and its attempt to retain control over the process of presidential succession. In Veracruz, however, the rebellion erupted in large part as a reaction to the growing strength of the campesino movement; the landowners took advantage of the conflict to eliminate some of the strongest and (for them) most problematic agrarian leaders: José Cardel, Juan Rodríguez Clara, José Fernández Oca and others.¹³ As I have mentioned, these sacrifices (and, more generally, the LCAEV's participation in the defense of the government) helped force official recognition of the campesino movement; at the same time, it can be said that with them begins the martyrology that would constitute much of the movement's historical memory in subsequent years.

¹¹ The incident began the previous October when guardias blancas associated with the powerful Lagunes family ambushed a local agrarian committee representative; advised of the attack, Tejeda lodged complaints with the federal government, demanding guarantees of safety for the agrarian committees. He then ordered the municipal president to bring the attackers to Xalapa with the assistance of the state civil guard. When the accused arrived at the municipal palace on March 9, instead of submitting to arrest they opened fire, killing seven and wounding four. See Heather Fowler Salamini, *Agrarian Radicalism in Veracruz, 1920-1930* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971), 38-39.

¹² The founding assembly included delegates from the ex-cantons of Chicontepec, Papantla, Misantla, Jalacincó, Coatepec, Huatusco, Orizaba, Xalapa, Córdoba, Veracruz and Las Tuxtlas; the remaining (and mostly more remote) ex-cantons of Ozuluama, Tantoyuca, Zongolica, Cosamaloapan, Acayucan and Minatitlán were to designate their representatives later on. "Acta Constitutiva de la Liga de Comunidades Agrarias del Estado de Veracruz," in Vladimir Acosta Díaz, *La lucha agraria en Veracruz* (Xalapa: Liga de Comunidades Agrarias y Sindicatos Campesinos del Estado de Veracruz, 1989), 25-30.

¹³ See, among other accounts: Soledad García Morales, *La rebelión delahuertista en Veracruz* (Xalapa: Universidad Veracruzana, 1986); León Medel y Alvarado, "La reacción antiagraria y el asesinato de Juan Rodríguez Clara," in Bernardo García Díaz, ed., *Documentos, testimonios y crónicas de la Revolución Mexicana en Veracruz* (Xalapa: Secretaría de Educación de Veracruz, 2010), 224-228; Alfredo Delgado Calderón, "Viento sobre el potrero. Revolución y agrarismo en el sur de Veracruz," doctoral dissertation, Centro de Investigación y Docencia en Humanidades del Estado de Morelos, 2010, 539-542.

This memory is expressed, first of all, in texts produced by the Liga itself. From the outset, the organization had both its own press and a clear understanding of propaganda work, due to Almanza's and other organizers' recent experience with radical activism in the port of Veracruz. Some of these leaders, having grown up as campesinos with little formal education, had learned to read and write as soldiers during the Revolution or in radical study groups where they had also been exposed to works of anarchist and socialist philosophy. These practically self-taught leaders, and others such as Cardel who had received somewhat more formal education due to their slightly superior economic condition (a sector that David Skerit calls *campesinos medios*), became the organic intellectuals of the agrarian movement, with the crucial capacity to move between two worlds—urban and rural—and to use the written and printed word as a weapon of struggle.¹⁴

Besides the impetus provided by these leaders and activists, another important factor was the funding that the LCAEV received from both the government of General Heriberto Jara (1924-1927) and those headed by Tejeda (1920-1924 and 1928-1932), which made possible the generation of a substantial number of brochures, manifestos, flyers, and even a biweekly newspaper, *La Voz del Campesino*. Although little has survived of these documents, those that still exist help us to understand how the intellectual leadership of the Liga perceived the struggle in its early years. Given the context described above, it is not surprising that many of these perceptions emphasize the question of violence.

The 1924 pamphlet *El agrarismo en México. La cuestión agraria y el problema campesino. Puntos de vista de la LCAEV* exemplifies the Liga's radical ideology in its early years. Reflecting the organization's affiliation with the Communist Party,¹⁵ its platform goes well beyond the postrevolutionary governments' land reform policies to advocate class

¹⁴ David Skerit, *Una historia agraria en el centro de Veracruz, 1850-1940* (Xalapa: Universidad Veracruzana, 1989), 172-173.

¹⁵ The Liga was affiliated with the Communist Party of Mexico and the Moscow-based Kresintern (Peasant International) until 1929, when ideological differences (especially the Liga's loyalty to the Mexican government during the uprisings of the period, in defiance of the hard-line Soviet stance) provoked Galván's expulsion from the CPM; in response, both the LCAEV and the Confederación Nacional Campesina (also led by Galván) broke ties with the party.

struggle, proletarian rebellion and the abolition of private property. The pamphlet also shows a marked preoccupation with violence and victimization from its opening pages, beginning with the dedication: “To you, martyrs of the campesino cause! Tenacious paladins of Mexican agrarianism who, prodigal with your blood, shed it in torrents to wash away the injustice, evil, crime and slavery that stain and degrade this earth that now covers your mortal remains!” To these “unknown heroes” the author or authors suggest that their consolation will be the triumph of the struggle and, with it, the longed-for benefits of modernity: “¡Tomorrow, modern machines will roll crackling over your forgotten tombs! May the crackling of their motors and the voluptuous howl of the earth, as it feels itself caressed by the iron that cleaves its entrails, be the most eloquent hymn of gratitude to your noble sacrifice!”¹⁶ The transformation of “unknown” victims into martyrs thus occurs by means of a substitution, in which the projected replacement of man by machine vindicates an otherwise bloody yet potentially futile sacrifice.

Having put forward this dream of future triumph and modernization, the authors turn to the complicated present, which is illustrated by a theatrical metaphor. Indicating the “soil of the Republic” to be “the vast stage where the vivid tragedy of our social development unfolds,” they denounce the lack of true representation of those who should be occupying the principal roles:

In this play, whose powerful script is meant to impress the galleries—popular masses—with the spectacle of a simulated social transformation, we workers and campesinos undoubtedly have very important roles to play...

But the scenes succeed one another, characters and sets change, there are exits, intermissions, quick curtains... and our turn doesn't come. Will we finally act?... Let us wait.

When at last the campesinos appear onstage, their role turns out to be little more than that of cannon fodder:

Now the set changes. After the intermission, a violent scene, a bloody clash, a picture of horror; this is the part of the play assigned to us to perform. Our number is over, we exit the stage. We haven't

¹⁶ Comité Ejecutivo de la Liga de Comunidades Agrarias del Estado de Veracruz, *El agrarismo en México. La cuestión agraria y el problema campesino. Puntos de vista de la LCAEV* (Xalapa: Liga de Comunidades Agrarias del Estado de Veracruz, 1924), 1.

done badly, since they applaud us—but at the same time they chase us out—they take back the weapons and tell us that for now, it's enough [...].

Upon exiting the “theater,” the campesino actors discover that “everything around us remains as it was”.¹⁷

With this suggestive invocation of social struggle as performance, *El agrarismo en México* condemns official agrarianism, which manipulates the campesino “actors” for its own ends rather than effecting true change, and calls for radical action. In these passages, as well as in the photographs that appear throughout the text, the immediate reference is to those violent events that, only a year and a half after the LCAEV's founding, had already left so many martyrs in their wake. Many of the photos depict agraristas who later died at the hands of local bosses or landowners, mostly during the de la Huerta rebellion. Both these and the collective photos, such as those taken at the Liga's first congress, are accompanied by captions that point out the martyrs portrayed therein, giving details of the crimes that brought about their deaths. Thus the pamphlet, apart from its propagandistic message, serves as a memorial and martyrology of the early years of the movement, one that would continue to grow over the next decade.

The preoccupation with martyrdom reappears in the Liga's newspaper *La Voz del Campesino*, published in Xalapa with distribution to agrarian committees throughout the state. Directed by Úrsulo Galván, at the time a congressman and president of the LCAEV, it also featured the participation of Manuel Almanza—although, like nearly all of the paper's contributors, Almanza left his articles unsigned or signed them with a pseudonym. Almost luxurious in its first issue (October 15, 1925) and more modest in subsequent ones, *La Voz del Campesino* published news and analyses of relevant events at the local and national level, and also served to record and consolidate the memory of the LCAEV and the agrarista experience.

One of its first articles thus concerns the founding of the Liga itself. The article, titled “Cómo se inició la organización de la Liga de

¹⁷ Comité Ejecutivo, *El agrarismo en México*, 6-7.

Comunidades Agrarias del Estado” and signed by Guillermo Cabal, takes place in the first days of February 1923; it recalls the “small band of idealists,” the author among them, who, “driven by an unmatched love of their cause [...] set out on the painful journey completely committed to victory even at the cost of their lives, which they gladly offered in the name of the redemptive cause of the exploited campesino [...].¹⁸ The chronicle recounts the group’s experiences: places visited, encounters with the locals, the difficulties and triumphs of the small mission.

In Cabal’s narrative, a striking contrast emerges between two emotional registers: on the one hand, the almost nostalgic recollection of the combative and joyous spirit that animated the group; and on the other, the bitter memory of violence and loss. In reference to the latter, the author mentions “our comrades José Cardel and [José] Fernández Oca, dead as a result of the De la huerta uprising, disappeared from the world but alive in our memory” and also “‘El Guayabal,’ immortalized by the blood spilled by seven comrades treacherously murdered by the landowners Lagunes who, thanks to the impunity with which their previous crimes have gone unpunished, continue to believe themselves owners and lords of their feudal domains.” These details, besides commemorating agrarista martyrs, underscore the dangerous conditions of the propaganda tour; in fact, Cabal reports that in Tlacotepec de Mejía, Galván’s birthplace, the expedition met with opposition from local authorities:

Our presence there was like a bomb tossed at the feet of the landowners who, riling up their serfs, got them to lock us up in a cell in the garrison; but our good spirits partly defused the wrath of the perplexed soldiers who couldn’t explain how, even under these conditions, we still had the breath to continue belting out our revolutionary anthems.¹⁹

In spite of the climate of danger that he describes and the sadness and anger that colors the allusions to the fallen comrades, Cabal emphasizes the group’s achievements and makes use of black humor to narrate the adventure. He concludes on a heroic note that, again, suggests substitution, in this case the replacement of past and present actors with those yet to

¹⁸ Guillermo Cabal, “Como se inició la organización de la Liga de Comunidades Agrarias del Estado,” *La Voz del Campesino*, October 15, 1925.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

come, in a future contingent upon an as-yet hypothetical triumph: "Here is the prologue to the history of this organization. Others will be in charge of writing its epilogue when, with the triumph of the proletarian revolution, the land, without owners holding it back, will only belong to those who work it!"²⁰

The intimate relation between victimization and victory permeates *La Voz del Campesino* as well as the rest of the LCAEV's propaganda, including its many *corridos*, which together read as a litany of the movement's principal heroes and martyrs as well as a hymn to collective struggle.²¹ A few years later, Galván's death in 1930, the Liga's internal divisions, the fierce opposition from landowners and other elites as well as the federal government, the rise of the paramilitary organization La Mano Negra²² and the realignment of political forces in the state after the 1932 elections would put an end to the utopian dream expressed in these texts, although, as we will see further on, both the struggle and its violence have persisted in diverse forms up to the present day. But in these early documents of the Liga, the agrarista martyrs function as a kind of secular saint whose blood, spilled in the struggle against capitalist exploitation, serves to nourish and sanctify the cause.

Later Testimonies

In the texts generated from within the campesino movement, it is not surprising that the interpretation of violence is somewhat simplistic, invariably following the Marxist model of class struggle. The cause is just, the campesinos' weapons are exclusively for self defense, while the brutality comes from the other side, that of the landowner/capitalist exploiter and his minions. This pro-agrarista version, to be sure, counters the version widely perpetuated in the dominant press, that blamed the agraristas for the insecurity in the countryside and heavily publicized any and all instances of abuse: cases of agrarista groups taking advantage of their

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Georgina Trigos, *Los corridos agraristas veracruzanos* (Xalapa: Universidad Veracruzana, 1989).

²² Antonio Santoyo, *La Mano Negra: poder regional y estado en México* (México: Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1995); David Skerrit, "¿Qué es la Mano Negra?", *Anuario III* (Universidad Veracruzana), 1985.

favorable relationship with the government to displace their neighbors or expropriate the properties not of haciendas but rather of honest and hardworking small landholders.

In this version “from above,” the only solution is the disarmament of the campesinos; in the agrarista interpretation, on the other hand, weapons in the hands of the rural working class are the only guarantee of justice in a terrain profoundly marked by historical inequalities, and to hand them over would be synonymous with suicide. Indeed, it was only with the disarmament that was finally imposed in the 1930s that this phase of agrarian history came to an end; once disarmed, the campesino organizations lost their strength, although—it is worth emphasizing—not without having achieved significant and lasting transformations in the patterns of land ownership in the region.

While the academic historiography of the agrarian movement in Veracruz began to appear at the end of the 1960s in the pioneering work of Heather Fowler Salamini, Romana Falcón and others, this work focused primarily on the movement’s leadership and the complicated interactions between the movement and state and national political spheres.²³ In subsequent decades, however, research in this area began to shift toward a more sociological and microhistorical approach, in which the primary subjects were now the movement’s rank-and-file participants.²⁴ Work published in the 1980s through the present has included oral histories based on interviews with *ejidatarios* as well as memoirs written by activists and leaders at the local level. These testimonies, even when fragmented and

²³ Salamini, *Agrarian Radicalism*; Romana Falcón, *El agrarismo en Veracruz, la etapa radical, 1928-1945* (México City: Colegio de México, 1977); Olivia Domínguez Pérez, *Política y movimientos sociales en el tejedismo* (Xalapa: Universidad Veracruzana, 1986). See also the critique of this approach in Skeritt, *Historia agraria*, 20-22.

²⁴ The collectively authored *Agraristas y agrarismo*, coordinated by Olivia Domínguez Pérez, offers a diversified view of the LCAEV’s history, although like the many other works published under the auspices of the State and its affiliated campesino organizations, it strays little from canonical interpretations, albeit opening the way to then-new areas of investigation, such as the impact of agrarian reform on indigenous communities. More recently, close studies of regions and microregions, such as Velázquez Hernández’s *Territorios fragmentados*, have generated a more complex picture of State-civil society interactions that emphasizes the diverse and often contradictory interests at work in conflicts over land.

partial, have enriched our knowledge of the era and of the agrarian struggle as it was lived on the ground, in the trenches.

As one might expect, these testimonial versions are denser and more complicated than the propaganda texts of the 1920s. In them violence breaks out suddenly, sometimes coming from the outside, other times emerging from within the community itself, creating or fomenting divisions that are rarely legible to the external observer. Ideological factors merge and become confused with personal and family matters that are rarely made clear to the researcher or explained in detail in the autobiographical text. Indeed, for these communities accustomed to suffering agricultural plagues, epidemics, floods and other natural phenomena that could drastically alter the basic conditions of existence at any moment, violence appears, or is represented in the subjects' memory, as yet another implacable force to be endured as best one can under the circumstances. Yet this representation is incomplete insofar as it masks an essential difference: that in this case, there is a conscious decision to participate, to take sides, to assume risks, to be the subject of a struggle and thus to bet on the future.

How is the agrarista struggle remembered in the rural communities of Veracruz? The answer to this question involves an infinite number of local particularities, but even while recognizing this diversity, we may identify certain common themes: secrecy; fear of repercussions on the part of the boss or landowners; violence; betrayal. The martyrology of the LCAEV has its micro versions in numerous communities; at the same time, we also find real changes, successes. Let us consider some examples.

In *Tuzamapan. El poder viene de las cañas*, sociologists Martha Patricia Ponce Jiménez and María Cristina Núñez Madrazo use oral history to document the transformation of Tuzamapan from a Porfirian sugar-producing estate to a modern *ejido*, in both cases one of the largest in the central region of Veracruz. The section of the book that addresses *agrarismo* consists of a synthetic narrative that weaves together multiple interviews with ejidatarios of the agrarista generation, from 70 to 90 years old at the time of the project. These informants, who in other parts of the book recall the harsh and degrading nature of life on the hacienda (corporal

punishments, absolute control exercised by the *patrón*, economic enslavement to the company store, and so on), emphasize the risks they faced in the agrarian struggle and the deprivations they suffered in the process:

Here in Tuzamapan agrarianism was hard because only 34 of us joined the struggle for the lands. [...] At that time, those of us who were in the agrarian association would go out on watch at night with the weapons that Colonel Adalberto Tejeda had given us, telling us: --set up the guerrilla...

Because the engineer Espinoza [the owner] had the federal forces, it wasn't like in other villages, here there were federal soldiers running around the countryside. Also, there were the men from Almolonga, Manuel Parra's people [La Mano Negra], who would go out looking for the committees, so we didn't know where to hide.²⁵

In spite of the risks, the agraristas organized in secret, aided by rural families who gave them food since, living clandestinely, they could no longer work on the hacienda. Given these conditions, their resolute attitude is striking: "The agrarian struggle was hard, we campesinos wanted land to work on and we didn't even have money to eat with. [...] At that time hardly anybody wanted to be an agrarista, but we did, we cared about organizing ourselves."²⁶ Ironically, a key motivating factor would seem to have been a land petition filed in neighboring Jalcomulco; not as a positive example, but rather because the formation of the Jalcomulco ejido involved the expropriation of Tuzamapan lands that could well have been included in a local claim. "Since we hadn't filed a petition, they were going to take those lands away from us."²⁷ The counterclaim filed was thus a response to this competitive situation.

Besides this possible conflict between potential ejidatarios, interviewees also spoke of the division between campesinos—primary producers—who required land for their own production and sugar mill workers who, in addition to their salaries, enjoyed the right to a small amount of land, which they paid the campesinos to maintain and make productive. At one point this division seems to have culminated in a

²⁵ Martha Patricia Ponce Jiménez y María Cristina Núñez Madrazo, *Tuzamapan. El poder viene de las cañas*, ([Xalapa?]: n.p, 1992), 82.

²⁶ Ponce Jiménez and Núñez Madrazo, *Tuzamapan*, 83.

²⁷ *Ibid.* In fact, land grant documents in the state archive often point to this type of situation, in which a successful land petition by one group of campesinos generated repercussions that eventually led to further petitions.

complicated situation: the segment of the community that supported agrarismo drew up a land petition and gathered the required number of signatures, entrusting mill worker Pedro Contreras with the mission of taking the documents to Xalapa, the state capital. However, instead of going to the offices of the LCAEV, Contreras delivered the papers to the Confederación Regional Obrera Mexicana (CROM, a powerful national labor confederation). There, instead of an agrarian committee, the organization created was a labor syndicate—a fact that the petitioners only became aware of when a delegation of *cromistas* arrived at the hacienda to congratulate the new union. Only later would the agrarista faction successfully petition for a land endowment, apparently with the direct intervention of Governor Tejeda.²⁸

Curious as this anecdote may seem, in reality it illustrates one of the most common and painful aspects of the agrarian struggle: betrayal, often carried out by those individuals charged with mediating between the rural communities and what Ángel Rama called “the lettered city” (*la ciudad letrada*): the urban world ruled by lawyers, bureaucracy, and the implacable power of the official document.²⁹ the LCAEV—whose leaders, as I have already mentioned, understood very well the power of the press and the written word—tried to facilitate this negotiation to the extent possible; among other efforts, they opened a café, “La Proletaria,” in Xalapa where campesinos on official business could arrive and receive modestly-priced nourishment along with orientation regarding the intricacies of the bureaucratic process. Yet such facilitation was not easy; the landowners, attuned to the movements of the agrarian committees, were in many cases able to intercept the mediators and, using bribery and/or open threats, assure that the documents never reached their destination.

The power of the written word is clearly expressed in the *Memorias* written by Porfirio Pérez Olivares, agrarian organizer from the municipality of Soledad de Doblado, in the central region of the state. Pérez recalls that, although in the village where he grew up there was no school, he learned to read and write with the help of relatives, among them his father, who

²⁸ Ponce Jiménez and Núñez Madrazo, *Tuzamapan*, 83-84.

²⁹ Ángel Rama, *La ciudad letrada* (Hanover, NH: Ediciones del Norte, 1984).

bought him newspapers on his visits to Soledad, as well as a sympathetic travelling merchant who introduced him to the world of literature.³⁰ His apprenticeship in the written word served him well later when he entered local politics and helped make him an able defender of campesino rights, a respected official in the ejido, and years later, chronicler of the agrarian struggle in his region.

Like the testimonies from Tuzamapan, Pérez Olivares's *Memorias* attests to the atmosphere of violence and instability that surrounded the agrarian movement. In Soledad de Doblado the movement began soon after Venustiano Carranza's proclamation of the agrarian law of 1915, when campesinos from the area immediately began to file petitions soliciting land. Pérez Olivares writes,

Organizing in defense of their interests, the landowners immediately sparked an unequal and bloody war. The campesinos, in spite of having the law on their side, lacked even the most elementary means of defending themselves, so they were afraid to join the fight for the land. Even so, when the time came there were plenty of brave and loyal campesinos who took on the fight without stopping to worry about the risks that they ran.³¹

One of Pérez Olivares's uncles was a campesino leader who later had to move to Soledad to protect his life. However, other members of the family opposed agrarismo and for that reason joined the Delahuertista rebellion. "All those people, landowners or, the majority, their bootlickers (*lambiscones*), thought that if Adolfo de la Huerta reached the presidency he would put a stop to what was already unstoppable: the agrarian redistribution." Although Pérez Olivares does not go into detail about the anti-agrarianism professed by his relatives and acquaintances who joined the ranks of the rebels, it is clear that within the community existed divisions and rival interests undoubtedly more complex than the agrarista model of class conflict. In fact, the violence which would lead to the departure of Pérez Olivares's family from the village of Cerro de León in 1929 was not directly related to a conflict between campesinos and

³⁰ Porfirio Pérez Olivares, *Memorias. Un dirigente agrario de Soledad de Doblado* (Xalapa: Universidad Veracruzana, 1992), 28, 32.

³¹ Pérez Olivares, *Memorias*, 30.

landowners, but rather to intrafamilial tensions exacerbated by the general climate of insecurity and crime in the countryside.

During these years, the youth of Cerro de León had formed a baseball team that competed against other teams from the area. However, some members of the team, relatives of Pérez Olivares, had become involved in banditry; these began to act aggressively toward him, at one point demanding the team's equipment and destroying it in the patio of his home. At the same time, other relatives made Porfirio's sister the object of their hatred, to the point that "when she went to the creek to wash clothes, she always went prepared, that is, armed with a knife or a razor."³² Among rising tensions, the family decided to move to another town. Although the reasons behind these conflicts are vague and perhaps could be interpreted as the "normal" jealousies and resentments of village social life, it is clear in the narrative that the personal circumstances of this family were directly affected by the climate of violence that prevailed in the region during this period.

Continuing his narration of the agrarista experience, Pérez Olivares refers to the murder of eight agrarian leaders by guardias blancas in November 1935. Due to the atmosphere of fear and persecution that intensified following the massacre, he and his father spent the month of December sleeping in the bush, "putting up with the mosquitoes and the intense cold, preparing for the worst, since it was no surprise to learn that they'd ambushed this person or that in the night they'd gone and taken that other person from his house and killed him."³³ Alfonso Osegueda Cruz documents these same events in *La masacre del 28 de noviembre de 1935 en Laguna Blanca: El agrarismo radical en Soledad de Doblado, Veracruz (1912-1935)*, emphasizing their importance for local history and the construction of collective identity.

Utilizing interviews, written texts and corridos, Osegueda Cruz assembles a record of historical events—the land petitions, formation of ejidos and repression—from the perspective of oral tradition and popular memory. His book's third chapter, which reconstructs in detail the events

³² Pérez Olivares, *Memorias*, 38.

³³ Pérez Olivares, *Memorias*, 51.

of the night of November 28, alternates testimonial accounts from residents and witnesses with verses from corridos that express the community's suffering:

Para empezar a cantarles
Me duele hasta el corazón
¡Qué lágrimas de tristeza
Que terrible situación!

El día se me hace chiquito
Para escribir con la pluma
Lo que pasó en Santa Cruz,
Mirador y la Laguna.³⁴

The anonymous authors of the corridos, speaking for the campesino community represented in Osegueda Cruz's book, portray the massacre as a vicious crime; yet, not surprisingly, the murders of José Lezama, Feliciano García, Urbano Rincón, José Rincón, Antonino Jiménez, Eusebio Morales, Victoriano Osorio and Odilón Jácome, in which the army participated directly or indirectly alongside the landowners' hired guns, would go unpunished. However, as in many other places where the agrarian struggle reached a high degree of intensity and violence, redistribution of land in Laguna Blanca was successfully carried out before the end of the decade.

Writing just before the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement and in light of the then-recent reform of constitutional Article 27—two events that would profoundly affect the Mexican countryside in the 1990s—Osegueda Cruz observes, “Even though things are expensive and one has to work harder to survive, ownership of the land and its current utilization is a concrete and objective achievement that the campesinos try to reaffirm on a daily basis.”³⁵ He also explains that since the 1930s, the area's campesinos have gathered each year to honor the memory of the murdered agraristas, “so that the date is not forgotten.”³⁶ The commemoration not only serves to remember the community's past, but also ritually transfers the responsibility of agrarian struggle from one

³⁴ Anonymous corrido cited in Alfonso Osegueda Cruz, *La masacre del 28 de noviembre de 1935 en Laguna Blanca: El agrarismo radical en Soledad de Doblado, Veracruz (1912-1935)* (Xalapa: Centro de Servicios Municipales “Heriberto Jara,” 1993), 96.

³⁵ Osegueda Cruz, *La masacre*, 114.

³⁶ Osegueda Cruz, *La masacre*, 11.

generation to another and assures that the sacrifices of yesterday continue to bear meaning today and into the future. Once again, popular remembrance of agrarismo and its martyrs serves as a powerful means of recreating and affirming campesino identity in the present.

A Literary Account

In spite of its historical importance, the agrarian conflict in Veracruz has rarely emerged as a theme in the literature of the region. It appears, notably, in Xavier Icaza's novella "La hacienda" (1924), from a perspective that reflects that of the liberal elites of the period; Icaza exalts the "good" landowner and blames an outside agitator for manipulating the otherwise docile campesinos (who lack a will of their own) and provoking violence.³⁷ Agrarismo reappears in the novels of Gregorio López y Fuentes, including *Tierra* (1932) and *Milpa, potrero y monte* (1951). In the latter novel, the failure of land reform is manifest, since the government's decrees and arbitrary acts do not resolve the real problems of rural residents and communities. The agrarian conflict is also an important aspect of Sergio Galindo's *Otilia Rauda* (1986); though not the central theme, it functions as a moral index of the novel's main characters (landowners of central Veracruz and their descendants) and provides the political backdrop to Galindo's dark tale of intertwined jealousies and violence.

However, it is Francisco Salmerón's short story collection *Testimonios del Tecuán*, published by the Universidad Veracruzana in 1960, that most closely approximates the agrarista experience as narrated in the testimonies of participants, with its extremes of pain and hope, its eternal tension between courage and resignation. At the time of its publication, Salmerón had enrolled for a second time in the Universidad Veracruzana in order to study social anthropology, after having already established himself as a graphic artist and, previously, as a lawyer and judge in Orizaba. He was seen as a promising writer; Luis Leal, upon including Salmerón's "La tonal del 'Comisariado'" in his anthology *El cuento veracruzano* in 1966, cited the "strong images with which he

³⁷ Elissa Rashkin, "The X in Mexico: Xavier Icaza and the Literature of the Revolution," *Hipertexto* 5, winter 2007, <http://www.utpa.edu/dept/modlang/hipertexto/hiper5indice.htm>.

structures his stories” and commented: “His characters, rendered with vigorous strokes, don’t always triumph in life, yet they never run away from the situations that they have to face.”³⁸ Unfortunately, Salmerón died leaving only a small body of published work, which has since been almost forgotten. His only book of fiction, *Testimonios del Tecuán*, has not been reissued; yet, fifty years later, it stands up due to its accomplished literary style, its relevant themes and forceful language. In the seven stories that make up the collection, Salmerón draws on legend, oral tradition and popular memory in order to portray marginalized aspects of Veracruz history, among these, the struggle for the land.

The book opens with a prologue situated shortly before the start of the 1910 revolution, entitled “Tiempo de angustia.” An eternal time of conflict, instability and suffering; the anguish of a community without lands, that lives, barely, at the mercy of the landowners and their militias, ignored or mistreated by the authorities, and for whom the revolutions and counterrevolutions always mean the same thing: violence, displacement, hunger. The prologue narrates the loss of the communal lands due to the hacendados’ maneuverings during the Porfiriato, when this type of theft was legitimated by law and guaranteed by the federal police force, the *rurales*. It also narrates the beginning of the agrarista struggle, and in particular, the efforts of one individual, Faustino Mora, who is killed for his bravery, but not before having sown the seed of revolution among the members of his community. All of this is narrated in the voice of a campesino, Don Pedro, in conversation with his *compadre*. At the end of his monologue, Pedro expresses fatigue and fatalism:

There aren’t men like that anymore, *compadre*. Forgive me for saying, but there aren’t men like that anymore. No one who speaks up, no one who throws out his laugh to the winds. They say that now there’s peace, *compadre*, but what there is, is anguish and bitterness. Yeah, now the English can come in with their railroads. Now they can come because there isn’t anyone left to speak up: nothing but bitterness streaming from the eyes of the people. God did well in not giving me another son, in leaving us alone, me and the old lady! Because it’s plain to see, *compadre*, that these days kids turn out to be just like the hearts of the *tepejilote* [a wild corn-

³⁸ Luis Leal (ed.), *El cuento veracruzano* (Xalapa: Universidad Veracruzana, 1966), 163.

like plant]: even though they're born tender, they're already bitter inside...³⁹

Just as he finishes his speech, the door opens; his *comadre* enters with a newborn baby—Pedro's godson—in her arms, ending the prologue. This child, as Arturo Serrano writes in a review of the book, is the “symbolic heir of the community's past struggles” and is clearly associated with the Revolution; thus, the story's message is ultimately a hopeful one.⁴⁰ The optimism that Serrano mentions is not, however, in the stories' plots or outcomes; in *Testimonios del Tecuán*, just as in the history that the author uses as his raw material, rarely or never is there a happy ending. Rather, its optimism lays in the dignity of its characters, dignity that they maintain to the end; the will to resist, to keep going, to not give up in spite of the inequality, suffering, and threats of violence and death that confront them at every step.

The story “La tonal del ‘Comisariado’” narrates the impact of the agrarista movement on an indigenous community, displaced since *los tiempos otros*, the long-ago “other times,” as a result of the nineteenth-century laws that led to the division of communally-owned lands. Drawing on his knowledge as an anthropologist, Salmerón saturates his text with the cosmovision and cultural values of the community: aspects generally left out of the histories and testimonies of agrarismo, whether for ideological reasons (since the movement's Marxist orientation did not admit the validity of “superstition” or popular mysticism) or, perhaps, because neither the academic researchers nor their informants thought to delve into factors beyond the literal facts of the history in question. In any case, Salmerón attempts to interpret the violence of the agrarian conflict from an indigenous perspective in which the landscape and its mystic meanings are

³⁹ “Ya no hay hombres como ése, compadre. Habrá usted de perdonar, pero ya no hay hombres como ése. Ya no hay quien diga nada, ni quien echa su risa por los caminos. Dicen que hay paz, compadre, pero lo que hay es angustia y amargura. Ora sí pueden venir los ingleses con sus ferrocarriles. Ora sí pueden venir porque no hay quien diga nada: sólo chorrea la amargura de los ojos de las gentes. ¡Bien hizo Dios en no darme ningún otro hijo, sino solos la vieja y yo! Porque ha de ver, compadre, que ahora vienen los hijos como el cogollo del tepejilote: aunque nazcan tiernitos, ya traen por dentro el amargor...” Francisco Salmerón, *Testimonios del Tecuán* (Xalapa: Universidad Veracruzana, 1960), 22.

⁴⁰ Arturo Serrano, “*Testimonios del Tecuán*,” *La Palabra y el Hombre* 20 (October-December 1961), 755.

a central part of the story, along with the characters and their acts. The result is poetic in tone, but not, as a consequence, any less brutal.

“La tonal del ‘Comisariado’” begins with an apology: “You’ll have to excuse me, sir, but I’m going to cry.” To whom is the narrator speaking? We aren’t told, but this opening establishes the story’s testimonial tone: “That was how they killed Félix Zamora, *Comisariado* of these lands that give us sustenance.”⁴¹ Félix Zamora, it turns out, is one of those figures so significant in the campesino movement, those who by chance or because of innate talents acquire the ability to maneuver not only in their own community but also in the outside world, the world of letters, stamped paper and power: “Félix Zamora was just a boy who wasn’t yet a *topil* [traditional authority figure]. But he could sing church Latin; he knew the Castilian words of the foreigners, and his grandfather was the eldest of the principals: the one who kept the books of the Ancient Word [*la Palabra Primera*].”⁴² When the winds of Revolution blow through the village, Zamora joins the rebellion, for the simple reason that: “That was what the Ancient Word said: that we had to drive the foreigners off the lands.”⁴³

From that point on, the generational divide within the community becomes apparent; the elders see in the Revolution not the hope of recovering their lost lands, but rather a threat that will affect the entire collectivity, a threat expressed in religious, almost apocalyptic terms: “misfortune would come, a punishment from God.”⁴⁴ They perceive the landowner himself as an unreal character, distant, “he who lives in Xalapa” or even “the Lord of Xalapa,” possessed of hidden and invincible powers. However, the voice that speaks to Félix Zamora, the voice of the *Palabra Primera*, is more ancient than that of the elders, and is not swayed by their misgivings. His grandfather then warns that the harm that awaits Zamora will come by way of his *tonal*—the animal that is his spiritual double—and

⁴¹ “Habrà de dispensar, señor, que yo vaya a llorar. Que fue así como mataron a Félix Zamora, *Comisariado* de estas tierras que nos dan el maíz.” Salmerón, *Testimonios*, 45.

⁴² “Félix Zamora era un muchachito que no llegaba a *topil*. Pero cantaba el latín de la iglesia, sabía la palabra de Castilla de los fueranos y su abuelo era el más viejo de los principales: el que guardaba los libros de la Palabra Primera.” Salmerón, *Testimonios*, 46.

⁴³ “Que eso decía la Palabra Primera: que habíamos de echar a los fueranos de las tierras.” *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ “vendrían desgracias y un castigo de Dios.” *Ibid.*

that “the kid’s animal must not be mentioned, because, to keep harm from coming to a person, it’s what shouldn’t be spoken.”⁴⁵ The entire community thus makes offerings to the saints and spirits of the woods so that these will protect the young man’s tonal.

The fragile equilibrium maintained by means of offerings and prayers, however, falls apart all too easily in times of crisis and conflict. “What balls Félix Zamora has got!” (“—¡Qué grandes los tiene Félix Zamora!”). This expression of admiration, voiced thoughtlessly by a teacher “who later died a drunk,” turns out to be the detonator of the curse, in the community’s way of thinking: “Because those words in Castilian were bad words, the elders said it had to be a bad omen and that trouble would be coming after him.”⁴⁶ Zamora returns to the village, now bearing the title of ejido commissioner (*comisariado ejidal*) and bringing “the words of the Liga Agraria”; the “fueranos” leave—the “Señor de Xalapa” even dies of rage—and the ejido is established. But it isn’t long before the *guardias blancas* appear, commanded by Cruz Arenas; nor is it long before betrayal comes into play, much as we have seen in the historical testimonies, but in this case, in the form of someone who reveals the *comisariado’s* tonal to Cruz Arenas. When Arenas succeeds in killing that animal in the bush, he also acquires power over the agrarian leader, even though nature and the spirit world seem to protest the imminent injustice:

The night was heavy, Sir. By the Amoyolapa River you could hear the water thundering. You could hear the river thundering and wanting to turn over. Because back in the other times the destructor had come and pulled the river belly up. And that’s why it made that thundering sound, Sir, because the river wanted to turn itself over. [...] The *tesanto*, who watched over the house in the old days, fell off the altar. Over by my place, Sir, an animal went by that sounded like it was crying. And in the old fig tree the *tepa* was perched, shrieking, and no one wanted to go by there. It was the ancient woman crying because of having killed her children.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ “no le he de mentar el animal del muchachito porque es lo que no se debe decir para que no le busquen un daño a uno.” Salmerón, *Testimonios*, 47. On *tonalismo* see Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, *Obra antropológica VIII. Medicina y mágica* (México: Universidad Veracruzana/ Instituto Nacional Indigenista/ Gobierno del Estado de Veracruz/ Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1992), 103-105.

⁴⁶ “Porque era mala esa palabra de Castilla, los ancianos dijeron que había de ser de mal agüero y que le habían de buscar un daño.” Salmerón, *Testimonios*, 48.

⁴⁷ “La noche estaba pesada, Señor. Por el río de la Amoyolapa se oía el tronido del agua. Se oía el tronido del río que quería voltiarse. Porque en los

Félix Zamora dies tortured in a pool of blood at the hands of the guardias blancas. Yet Salmerón makes it clear that he dies with dignity, feeding the earth with his blood, just as we have seen expressed in what I have called the agrarista martyrology. A liminal character, armed with both ancient wisdom and the modern power of the word, Zamora dies like so many other agraristas: martyred, yet leaving as his legacy a true transformation, the restitution of ancestral lands in the form of an ejido, whose history, blurred as it may become with the passing of time, will continue to serve as the axis of belonging for the members of his community.

Along with Salmerón's interest in incorporating elements of an indigenous worldview into the story of the agrarian struggle, he is also clearly concerned with the dynamics of power and especially the relationship between language and violence. In fact, the book can be usefully analyzed in terms of its depiction of this relationship. In "La tonal del 'Comisariado,'" words, especially curses, but also opinions expressed in the language of the oppressors, carry a mystic charge that ruptures the balance between man and nature and can lead its victims to their deaths. In another story from the book, "Velas para San Andrés," the relationship is even more direct. Juan Francisco Tlayohual holds the traditional, yet now powerless, office of Padre Principal; one night, with his tongue loosened by cane liquor, he speaks too freely, criticizing the false words of the outsiders who have taken over the community's lands and social structure. Because he says these things to the police chief, he is killed like a rabid dog—according to his executioner, in order to protect the honor of the defamed authorities.

In these and the other stories, it is clear that the protagonists' struggle is not only for the land or for their rights as citizens and human beings, but also for the word itself, and the real and symbolic power that it represents. Although in each of the stories the *tecuán*, or destructive

tiempos otros vino el dañino y jaló el río con la panza para arriba. Y es por eso que hace ese tronido, Señor, porque quiere voltiarse el río. [...] Del altar se cayó el *tesanto*, el que cuida la casa desde los tiempos de antes. Por mi rancho pasó, Señor, un animal que andaba como llorando. Y en la higuera vieja estaba parada la *tepa*, echando sus gritos y nadie quiso pasar por allí. Estaba la mujer antigua chillando porque había matado a sus hijos." Salmerón, *Testimonios*, 54.

animal, seems to triumph temporarily over the community, it is the power of *testimonio*, of memory, that keeps alive the possibility of future justice.

Some Considerations Regarding Memory

A book that has explicitly addressed the question of memory in relation to the agrarian struggle is Núñez Madrazo's *Ejido, caña y café: política y cultura campesina en el centro de Veracruz*. In her interviews with ejidatarios in the community of Chiltoyac, near Xalapa, Núñez Madrazo found that their accounts of agrarismo were marked by generational differences. She observes that "the testimonies of the oldest men and women go deep in time and recreate in detail the significant events and experiences of the agrarian struggle. Through them emerges the image of a community of campesinos who participated actively in the formation of the ejido."⁴⁸ These testimonies, like those from Tuzamapan and the Pérez Olivares memoir, focus primarily on local actors: the informant's relatives, neighbors, local leaders and other community members involved in the hazardous process of rural organization. The accounts are detailed and, at the same time, fragmented, whether due to the failing memory of the elderly informant or to the familiarity that, to a certain extent, impedes the articulation of a narrative completely accessible to the outside listener or reader. These interviewees recall events that are painful, but at the same time, as Núñez Madrazo points out, emphasize the campesinos' agency and participation in the fight for the land.

In contrast, the community's younger members, in speaking of the agrarian struggle, tend to follow closely the dominant/official version of national history, whose protagonists are not local actors but rather the heroes portrayed in school textbooks and many other media: "Zapata, Madero, Villa, Carranza, the Revolution: proper names that are taken up to explain the existence of the ejido in Chiltoyac as part of a national process."⁴⁹ This transformation of collective memory is not unique to Chiltoyac, but in fact widespread; the exaltation of Zapata as the hero par excellence of agrarismo is especially striking, considering that the majority

⁴⁸ María Cristina Núñez Madrazo, *Ejido, caña y café: política y cultura campesina en el centro de Veracruz* (Xalapa: Universidad Veracruzana, 2005), 85.

⁴⁹ Núñez Madrazo, *Ejido, caña y café*, 86.

of agrarian communities and leaders who took part in the Revolution in Veracruz participated on the side of the *carrancistas*. The *zapatista* movement, crucial in other parts of the country, had relatively little impact in the state, and in fact many of the groups referred to (by their victims) as “Zapatistas” during this period were in reality little more than gangs of bandits who took advantage of the climate of insecurity to harass rural villages and commit countless crimes against their inhabitants.

The remodeling of memory according to the nationalist script, in phrases like “when Zapata fought for the land” or “when [President Lázaro] Cárdenas gave us the ejido,” not only distorts history, but also takes agency away from the campesinos themselves and legitimizes, to a certain extent, their apparent submission to the postrevolutionary political regime and in particular the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), which at the time of writing is still the ruling party in Veracruz. However, to appreciate the complexity of this process, it seems relevant to cite the observations made by Alejandro Isla for the Argentine context:

We should recognize that the villagers’ struggle for their land and territory—sustained by a memory of militancy, transmitted from generation to generation—has had important results, beyond the fact that some people have wanted or needed to sell it. The fact of its progressive mercantilization, whether for speculation or productive use, does not contradict its defense as *communal territory*, in the sense of an affective and mythic space, nodal point of origin, even though the community’s control has noticeably diminished. The different groups of villagers’ discursive insistence on the idea that “the lands belong to the community,” more than a *parody*, is the insistent affirmation of a desire that is weakening day by day to the extent that Amaicha [the community in question] is part of Argentina.⁵⁰

Isla’s analysis supports that of Nuñez Madrazo, with both authors demonstrating that the neoliberal processes instigated or imposed by the State have not cancelled out the sense of belonging based on the popular memory of agrarian struggle—the “memory of resistance and courage” mentioned by Scott. Nevertheless, the alignment of local memory with nationalist-hegemonic narrative implies a weakening of the former that then allows for phenomena such as the campesino sector’s unconditional

⁵⁰ Alejandro Isla, *Los usos políticos de la identidad. Criollos, indígenas y Estado* (Buenos Aires: Libros de la Araucaria, 2009), 165-166.

allegiance to the PRI, which is perceived as the present-day incarnation of the regime that “gave us the land” even when it in fact gives nothing, not even protection of previously-won rights nor the guarantee of a secure livelihood. Emigration statistics from recent decades speak eloquently of a rural crisis that, for the moment, seems very far from being resolved.⁵¹

At the same time, we might ask if the appeal to well-known heroes of agrarian reform on the national level perhaps emerges out of a need to forget past traumas and to recreate the collectivity in almost utopian form, without the divisions and conflicts so painfully apparent in the historical accounts, where the roles and positions of the actors involved almost always contain elements of instability or ambiguity. Today’s adverse conditions, characterized by urbanization and migration, the displacement of primary agricultural products by imported and/or industrially-produced ones, the disappearance of once-common flora and fauna and the increasing scarcity of water and other natural resources, require, perhaps, the reinvention of a “before” marked not by the rivers of campesino blood that watered the cornfields and fed the implacable *monte*, but rather by a heroic narrative of resistance and triumph. Not by betrayals and “*tecuanes*,” but rather by organization and unity.

In recent years, official representations of the agrarista movement in the state have undergone a number of peculiar transformations. In Macuiltepetl park in Xalapa, the Mausoleo de los Mártires del Agrarismo, built during the second Tejeda administration following Úrsulo Gálvan’s death, was restored in 2007 as the “Mausoleo de los Veracruzanos Ilustres.” There, along with the mortal remains of Gálvan, Carolino Anaya, José Cardel, and other figures from the campesino movement, now rest those of several recently deceased intellectuals who, in spite of their merits in other

⁵¹ Statistics from 2007 indicated that 50,000 veracruzanos were leaving every year, sending back approximately one and a half billion dollars annually, placing Veracruz among the top migrant-exporting states and making migrant remittances the state’s largest source of revenue. While emigration has helped communities at home survive, it has had major social consequences, including the division of families and the disappearance of about 1500 towns and villages between 2000 and 2005 alone, as well as the deaths of about 240 veracruzanos per year in the attempt to cross the border, an average of one death every 36 hours. Rubén Rojas, “Cada 36 horas fallece un paisano al intentar llegar a EU: Rafael Arias,” *Diario de Xalapa*, December 30, 2007, <http://www.oem.com.mx/diariodexalapa/notas/n541198.htm>.

fields, had little to do with agrarismo. The absurdity of turning “mártires” into “ilustres” may be seen as a counterpart to popular incorporation of Zapata and Villa in the pantheon of regional heroes; in this case, the agrarista heroes are incorporated into a narrative that abstractly proclaims Veracruz’s greatness while divesting their particular histories of sociopolitical meaning.

Agrarismo, embodied in the figure of Úrsulo Galván, also appears in the mural painted in 2010 in the state government building in Xalapa by local artist Melchor Peredo. Galván, on horseback, is depicted waving a red banner that proclaims “tierra y libertad,” slogan of the LCAEV. Yet he is curiously garbed in a white loincloth—in the words of the painter, “not with the uniform that he used to wear, but rather, almost naked like a campesino.”⁵² For viewers familiar with historical images of Galván, this costume is disconcerting, since the photographic record indicates that the charismatic agrarian leader used the typical mestizo dress of the region as well as the formal suit and tie considered proper to his political office. In undressing Galván “like a campesino,” it is clear that Peredo intended to represent him as a transcendent symbol of a greater collectivity. Yet presenting him in this fashion erases his specific identity and blurs the details of an historical struggle that, painted on the entrance of a public building in front of which marginalized groups can often be found protesting, might otherwise disrupt the official fiction of social harmony.

In fact, perhaps the most dramatic expression of campesino discontent in recent years took place on September 30, 2008, when Ramiro Guillén Tapia, rural teacher and indigenous Popoluca leader from the municipality of Soteapan in the southern part of the state, set himself on fire in the Plaza Lerdo, Xalapa’s central plaza, in front of the government palace, in order to demand from the Secretaría de la Reforma Agraria a solution to a dispute over ejidal lands in his municipality. The local press declined to investigate the causes behind the self-immolation of Guillén, who died the next day; however, the México City daily *La Jornada* reported that it stemmed from a conflict in existence since 1982. Beginning that

⁵² Melchor Peredo, “La Revolución en Veracruz,” *Diario de Xalapa*, July 5, 2010, <http://www.oem.com.mx/diariodexalapa/notas/n1696901.htm>.

year, 42 campesinos belonging to the organization headed by Guillén, el Comité Pro Defensa de los Derechos Humanos del Sur de Veracruz, had disputed 250 hectares of the ejido Ocozotepec with members of the Confederación Nacional Campesina and the Antorcha Campesina, two organizations closely associated with the PRI.

The dispute had generated acts of violence between the groups, although government representatives assured reporters that the conflict was at the point of being resolved—that all that was missing were a few documents—when Guillén chose to take his life. However, according to friends of the deceased activist, Governor Fidel Herrera Beltrán had refused to meet with them on 106 occasions, and it was this dismissal on the part of the authorities that had provoked Guillén’s “act of tremendous desperation.”⁵³

I conclude my reflections on violence and memory with the mention of the complicated and *sui generis* case of Ramiro Guillén Tapia, not so much for its spectacular violence, at once symbolic and real, but rather because it summarizes, in a way, a certain form of failed interaction between marginalized groups and the State both historically and in the present.⁵⁴ In the months before Guillén’s death, I observed as a passer-by several of the demonstrations staged by campesinos from Sotepan: small groups of ragged men in worn clothes and sandals, carrying signs written by hand in black marker, difficult to read and even more difficult to comprehend due to their extreme level of local specificity. The men’s appearance made it obvious that, unlike many other groups that demonstrated in the plaza during this period, they had not been brought in by any candidate or political group and, in spite of Guillén’s family’s political connections, were not backed by any official organization. Equally obvious, pathetically so, was the fact that their protest was unlikely to have

⁵³ Andrés T. Morales, “Fallece el líder populista que se prendió fuego en Veracruz,” *La Jornada*, October 2, 2008, <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2008/10/02/index.php?section=estados&article=032n1est>.

⁵⁴ Rather than the heroic martyrdom familiar from the *agrarista* texts of the 1920s, Guillén’s death brings to mind Roach’s discussion (drawn in turn from George Bataille’s notion of the “accursed share”) of sacrifice, violent excess and the “performance of waste”; that is, death as a “profitless expenditure” which, without accomplishing a concrete goal, dramatizes social contradictions in bloody and spectacular fashion. Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 123-125.

any effect either on the government officials targeted or on Xalapan civil society.

The breach between city and countryside, between those who possess the power of the word and the stamped document and those who have nothing more than their labor and their will, remains as wide as ever—due in part to the appropriation of agrarista discourse by a State that, operating in a context of economic globalization, has shown little or no interest in repairing, defending or promoting the prosperity of rural communities. The questions regarding violence and memory that I have raised here are not literary, nor even simply historical; rather, I believe, they motivate us to reflect on social conditions today, a century after the beginning of the Mexican Revolution, over 80 years since the death of Úrsulo Galván and with his death, the beginning of the end of the Liga de Comunidades Agrarias del Estado de Veracruz, at least in the combative form in which it emerged in 1923.

The countryside today, with its ghost towns, its lands rented or sold to transnational agrobusiness, its zones that are militarized or dominated by organized crime, its poverty, violence and tragedy, is different but, in some ways, not so different from the Porfirian landscape of a century ago. If today's campesinos no longer perish exhausted under the yoke of the hacendado, hundreds each year now die in the attempt to cross the border in search of better opportunities in the north. If in the past the only solution seemed to be for rural workers to arm themselves in order to assert and defend their rights, today there are weapons everywhere, producing and reproducing an endless spiral of violence. If, back then, the Revolution was a beacon of hope on the horizon, today the much-discussed democratic opening seems, perhaps, further off than ever.

As Christopher Boyer notes, “rural people’s self-identification as campesinos” has historically functioned as a touchstone of collective organization; yet it “remains to be seen [...] whether the politics of campesino solidarity will serve as a viable option for community survival in the unsparing economic environment of the early twenty-first century.”⁵⁵ In

⁵⁵ Christopher Boyer, *Becoming Campesinos: Politics, Identity, and Agrarian Struggle in Postrevolutionary Michoacán, 1920-1935* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 240.

order to avoid surrendering to pessimism, however, we may look to the past, recalling not only the blood spilled but also the courage of those who took part in the movement: not only the heroes of textbooks and monuments, but also the Félix Zamoras and their counterparts in the real life of each community, whose material needs and social-spiritual sense of belonging led them to take risks and carry out extraordinary acts. By paying attention not only to quantitative outcomes but also to the role of language and memory in the reproduction of rural identities, we may better appreciate the persistence as well as the potential revitalization of these identities as a component of social struggle.

Today, small groups are forming within civil society to look for alternatives for the countryside—new crops, organic agriculture, ecologically sustainable production and land management, for instance—and generating new possibilities based in the elemental connection between the earth and its inhabitants' sense of belonging at the local and regional levels. While unquestionably in the minority, the vitality of these efforts, in a scenario otherwise characterized by pessimism and despair, may yet serve as a fitting tribute to the memory of the numerous “campesino lives, sacrificed in the struggle for the acquisition of land”: regenerating, from the legacy of sacrifice and struggle, hope for a more just and equitable future.

Works Cited

- Acosta Díaz, Vladimir. *La lucha agraria en Veracruz*, vol. I. Xalapa: Liga de Comunidades Agrarias y Sindicatos Campesinos del Estado de Veracruz, 1989.
- Agetro, Leafar (Rafael Ortega). *Las luchas proletarias en Veracruz. Historia y autocrítica*. Xalapa: Barricada, 1942.
- Aguirre Beltrán, Gonzalo. *Obra antropológica VIII. Medicina y mágica. El proceso de aculturación en la estructura colonial* (1963). México, DF: Universidad Veracruzana/Instituto Nacional Indige-

- nista/Gobierno del Estado de Veracruz/Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1992.
- Bartra, Armando. *Los herederos de Zapata: Movimientos campesinos posrevolucionarios en México*. México, DF: Era, 1985.
- Blázquez Domínguez, Carmen, coord. *Tierra y poder en Veracruz. De la colonización a la posrevolución*. Xalapa: Arana Editores, 2009.
- Boyer, Christopher. *Becoming Campesinos: Politics, Identity, and Agrarian Struggle in Postrevolutionary Michoacán, 1920-1935*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003.
- Buckles, Daniel, and Jacques Chevalier. "Ejido versus bienes comunales: historia política de Pajapan." In Domínguez Pérez, 231-247.
- Cabal, Guillermo. "Como se inició la organización de la Liga de Comunidades Agrarias del Estado." *La Voz del Campesino*, 15 October 1925.
- Carrillo Dewar, Ivonne. "La lucha por la tierra de las comunidades indígenas en el norte de Veracruz. Notas para una reconstrucción histórica." In Domínguez Pérez, 159-181.
- Comité Ejecutivo de la Liga de Comunidades Agrarias del Estado de Veracruz. *El agrarismo en México. La cuestión agraria y el problema campesino. Puntos de vista de la LCAEV*. Xalapa: Liga de Comunidades Agrarias del Estado de Veracruz, 1924.
- Delgado Calderón, Alfredo. "Viento sobre el potrero. Revolución y agrarismo en el sur de Veracruz." doctoral dissertation, Centro de Investigación y Docencia en Humanidades del Estado de Morelos, Cuernavaca, 2010.
- Domínguez Pérez, Olivia. *Política y movimientos sociales en el tejedismo*. Xalapa: Universidad Veracruzana, 1986.
- Domínguez Pérez, Olivia, coord. *Agraristas y agrarismo*. Xalapa: Gobierno del Estado de Veracruz, 1992.
- Falcón, Romana. *El agrarismo en Veracruz, la etapa radical, 1928-1945*. México: Colegio de México, 1977.
- Fowler Salamini, Heather. *Agrarian Radicalism in Veracruz, 1920-1930*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971.

- Galindo, Sergio. *Otilia Rauda* (1986). Xalapa: Universidad Veracruzana, 2007.
- García Morales, Soledad. *La rebelión delahuertista en Veracruz (1923)*. Xalapa: Universidad Veracruzana, 1986.
- Icaza, Xavier. "La hacienda" (1924). *Gente mexicana*. Xalapa: Universidad Veracruzana, 1990.
- Isla, Alejandro. *Los usos políticos de la identidad. Criollos, indígenas y Estado*. Buenos Aires: Libros de la Araucaria, col. Violencia y Cultura, 2009.
- Leal, Luis, ed. *El cuento veracruzano*. Xalapa: Universidad Veracruzana, 1966.
- López y Fuentes, Gregorio. *Milpa, potrero y monte*. México: Botas, 1951.
- Medel y Alvarado, León. "La reacción antiagraria y el asesinato de Juan Rodríguez Clara." In Bernardo García Díaz, ed., *Documentos, testimonios y crónicas de la Revolución Mexicana en Veracruz*. Xalapa: Secretaría de Educación de Veracruz, 2010, 224-228.
- Morales, Andrés T. "Fallece el líder popoluca que se prendió fuego en Veracruz." *La Jornada*, October 2, 2008, <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2008/10/02/index.php?section=estados&article=032n1est>.
- Núñez Madrazo, María Cristina. *Ejido, caña y café: política y cultura campesina en el centro de Veracruz*. Xalapa: Universidad Veracruzana, 2005.
- Osegueda Cruz, Alfonso. *La masacre del 28 de noviembre de 1935 en Laguna Blanca: el agrarismo radical en Soledad de Doblado, Veracruz (1912-1935)*. Xalapa: Centro de Servicios Municipales "Heriberto Jara", 1993.
- Peredo, Melchor. "La Revolución en Veracruz." *Diario de Xalapa*, 5 July 2010, <http://www.oem.com.mx/diariodexalapa/notas/n1696901.htm>.
- Pérez Olivares, Porfirio. *Memorias. Un dirigente agrario de Soledad de Doblado*. Xalapa: Universidad Veracruzana, 1992.
- Ponce Jiménez, Martha Patricia, y María Cristina Núñez Madrazo. *Tuzamapan. El poder viene de las cañas*. [Xalapa?]: n.p., 1992.

- Rama, Ángel. *La ciudad letrada*. Hanover, NH: Ediciones del Norte, 1984.
- Rashkin, Elissa. "The X in Mexico: Xavier Icaza and the Literature of the Revolution." *Hipertexto* (University of Texas Pan-American) 5 (winter 2007),
<http://www.utpa.edu/dept/modlang/hipertexto/hiper5indice.htm>.
- Roach, Joseph. *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.
- Rojas, Rubén. "Cada 36 horas fallece un paisano al intentar llegar a EU: Rafael Arias". *Diario de Xalapa*, December 30, 2007,
<http://www.oem.com.mx/diariodexalapa/notas/n541198.htm>.
- Salmerón, Francisco. *Testimonios del Tecuán*. Xalapa: Universidad Veracruzana, 1960.
- Santoyo, Antonio. *La Mano Negra: poder regional y estado en México*. México: Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1995.
- Scott, James C. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1985.
- Serna, Ana María. *Manuel Peláez y la vida rural en la Faja de Oro. Petróleo, revolución y sociedad en el norte de Veracruz, 1910-1928*. México: Instituto Mora, 2008.
- Serrano, Arturo. "Testimonios del Tecuán" (review). *La Palabra y el Hombre* 20, October-December 1961: 753-755.
- Skerrit, David. *Una historia agraria en el centro de Veracruz, 1850-1940*. Xalapa: Universidad Veracruzana, 1989.
- . "¿Qué es la Mano Negra?", *Anuario III* (Universidad Veracruzana), 1985.
- Taylor, Diana. *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.
- Trigos, Georgina. *Los corridos agraristas veracruzanos*. Xalapa: Universidad Veracruzana, 1989.
- Velázquez Hernández, Emilia. *Territorios fragmentados. Estado y comunidad indígena en el istmo veracruzano*. Mexico, DF: CIESAS, 2006).
- Womack, John. *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution*. New York: Knopf, 1969.

Wood, Andrew Grant. *Revolution in the Street: Women, Workers, and Urban Protest in Veracruz, 1870-1927*. Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 2001.