Zapatismo and Community-Based Social Change
Toward a Feminist Global Praxis?

Melissa N. Govea

This chapter is based on research conducted for my master’s thesis, in which I used ethnographic research and in-depth interviews to examine the adoption of Zapatismo as a feminist framework in a Latino/a activist and Chicano/a student activist organization. During the two years I spent in the field, I had the opportunity to meet activists outside the two organizations with whom I worked; two of the activists I met from outside organizations spent time in Oventic, the largest of the Zapatista caracoles, or collectives. Working alongside the men and women of the community, these two participants provided firsthand accounts of Zapatista organizing, serving as a wonderful complement to the stories of organizing from their U.S. counterparts; their voices breathe life into this chapter. The goal of this chapter is to share the incredible work of the transnational activists from various social locations who are actively striving to incorporate Zapatismo as a feminist global praxis. Just as the Zapatista caracoles serve as a spiral to the outside world, so do the stories of the men and women in this chapter, who are heralding Zapatismo in a variety of extraordinary ways.

Zapatismo: A New Avenue for Activism

Since the EZLN set foot on the international stage in 1994, they have been paramount in a global struggle against globalization, imperialism, cultural hegemony, and neoliberal politics. Zapatismo has been a guiding political
practice for numerous activists throughout the world, linking them in solidarity with the political and social ideologies of the Zapatistas (Johnston and Laxer 2003; Zugman 2005). In concurrence with Zapatista organizing, contemporary activist circuits around the world have been modeling their own alternative political processes after the Zapatistas as a way to shape alternative realities in the face of imperialist domination. Through creating subversive discourses and employing a heavy “postcolonial” critique, these various activist circuits seek to create alternative spaces by drawing from cultural forms of knowledge, promoting egalitarian structure and organizing (Mora 2011). Zapatismo, as a political consciousness that strongly advocates for social justice and the reestablishment of basic rights to marginalized communities, emphasizes grassroots mobilization and united efforts to fight for social justice. These emphases have made Zapatismo enormously popular with transnational social movements, providing activists who are championing a variety of causes with a centralized ideology by which to construct counterhegemonic mobilization.

This chapter is loosely based on research I conducted for my master’s thesis, in which I explored the expansive power of the Zapatista movement by examining how Zapatismo was adopted as a feminist framework in two Latino/Chicano activist organizations. Over the course of two years, I conducted ethnographic research with both organizations with which I worked; during this time I had the opportunity to fully understand how Zapatismo worked to promote gender equity in these organizations. The group with which I worked the most in-depth is Voz,2 a Chicano student activist organization; I worked with various chapters in Orange and Los Angeles Counties. The second organization with which I worked, Rancheros Unidos, is a primarily Latino organization, composed of farmers and local activists in Los Angeles. During my time with both organizations, I had the opportunity to meet and work alongside activists who were heartily involved in various organizations. Several of the men and women whom I met had worked alongside the Zapatistas in Oventic, a caracole in Chiapas, Mexico, through Solidaridad Zapatista, an activist immersion program. Over the course of twenty months, I employed ethnographic methods by acting as a participant observer within my two field sites; this ethnographic work was supplemented by conducting ten in-depth interviews with members of Voz and with people who had traveled to Oventic via Solidaridad Zapatista.3 Throughout the period in which I collected data, I spent time attending the weekly meetings of various chapters, helping to paint signs for Indigenous Peoples’ Day, observing impromptu protests, assisting in fund-raising, hearing lectures, and so forth. The Voz activists with whom I worked often knew of various social justice events occurring both on and off their respective of campuses, to which they often