My Zapotec Museum: Violence, Capitalism, and Memory in Oaxaca, Mexico

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Abstract. This article offers a close reading of two sites of memory in Oaxaca’s Sierra Zapoteca: a community museum about mining in the region and the ruins of a giant textile factory. While the factory ruins are difficult to find and effectively hidden by the Zapotec peasants using the land for farming, the museum at Natividad is open to the public and celebrates the role of Zapotec miners in this industrial sector. Together, both of these sites reveal a Zapotec people’s history of industrialization and the complicated nature of capitalism and ethnic identity. In addition to dealing with each site, the essay proposes that “sites of memory” require for their meaning interactions with people through bodily experiences based on movement, sight, and touch—a sensory experience that activates memory formation. Finally, the essay reflects the author’s attempt to consider the violence of capitalism that remains largely hidden within each site.

Deadly violence—that is, armed violence—seems to be a distant memory in the Sierra Zapoteca of Oaxaca, Mexico. From 1855 to 1920, Zapotec men and women from this region fought in a series of civil wars against foreign interveners, rival political opponents, and the revolutionary army of the Constitutionalists that eventually took power. They even turned against each other in a bloody regional war that forever shifted the balance of power from one town to another. I wrote about that history of violence and sacrifice among Zapotec communities using the framework of nation-state formation to explain how the memories of those struggles animated political culture for at least two generations. That was relatively easy, since I could use documents found in municipal, state, and national archives. More difficult to explain is another kind of violence, one that remains hidden and seemingly unacknowledged by the people of the Sierra Zapoteca. That is...
the violent history of industrial capitalism that changed the lives of workers during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and that continues to pose a threat to the people of this region today.

Archival documents provide some information for the stories I want to think about in this essay, but more important are two sites of memory in the region: a small mining museum in the town of Natividad and the ruins of a giant textile factory in the Xía Valley. Although I am calling these two places “sites of memory,” I want to clarify that I am departing in important ways from Pierre Nora’s use of the term. Nora overdraws the distinction between history and memory, arguing that places themselves have filled the void in a world without history.2 I prefer Keith Basso’s emphasis on the interactions between people and places. The Apache about whom Basso writes rely on the landscape as a guidebook from the past that helps them make sense of the present. Sites of memory in this context become a stage on which the past is brought to life by people who know the language of the landscape, the code of meanings embedded in trees, rocks, streams, and mountains.3

The importance of people moving within and around particular places fits with my own understanding of how memory works as a cognitive process within the brain. I think of memory formation as an active, physiological event that transforms experience into brain wave patterns that are organized, stored, and recalled through the activation of chemical neurotransmitters.4 The factory ruins and mining museum have meaning through the bodily interaction with these places. These sites have no inherent meaning without the person; the meaning or code is activated through human contact in which meaning or memory is assigned. We need to walk through these places, touch the objects, and experience the sensation of imagining going into the earth or working within the walls of a factory. Memory formation is an active, bodily practice, a performance of consciousness that changes in the very act of recalling the past to the present. Thus sites of memory are those places outside the body that initiate memory formation.5

In this essay, I offer a brief overview of the mining museum and the factory ruins. Both of these sites reveal a Zapotec people’s history of industrialization and the complicated interaction between ethnicity and wage labor. At the heart of my inquiry lies an exploratory reflection on my own interaction with the people of the Sierra Zapoteca and these two sites. In that sense, this essay is inspired by Michael Taussig’s My Cocaine Museum.6 I begin with the mining museum, then turn to the factory ruins, and conclude with reflections about my own Zapotec museum.
The Mining Museum at Natividad

I came to the mining town of Natividad to work in a local archive and to take photos of the exterior buildings of the gold mine. There was no real archive, but the photos were easy enough to take if I did not mind people looking at me suspiciously, asking with their glances, “What is that güero [white guy] doing taking photos of our mine?” I met a local regidor, an elected official on the town council, either by chance or because someone notified him of a stranger in town. Arrón Cruz was friendly and helpful and eventually gave me a private tour of a new mining museum the community had opened the year before.

The museum was quite impressive, and Cruz proved an excellent guide, along with a young woman in charge for that day. At first they said I could not take any pictures, but after I started talking about the history of the mine, about the owners and incidents that had happened at the mine, Cruz told me that I could take all the photos I wanted. The museum showed the depth of the mine and the dug-out tree trunks used as ladders that miners climbed to move from one level to the next. One of the most impressive displays explained how people processed their own clumps of ore, using a round grinding stone called la rastra. The mannequin in this display bore an incongruous smile, I thought, since his unprotected hands would have been soaking in a chemical bath made up mostly of mercury. The museum boasted many old photographs, hard hats, old lamps, maps, documents, pieces of machinery, information about the miner’s union, and even a walk-through model of the mineshaft itself. The museum is officially called Museo Comunitaria Minerero de Natividad.

I learned that the miners discovered an especially rich vein in 1929 and tripled production over the next four years of operation. Around this time, the mine operated at its highest capacity, employing nearly 1,000 workers from throughout the region. Employment rates have fallen since then by more than 90 percent. Another display showed an old air compressor used to exchange bad air from the mine with oxygen from outside. The museum employee explained how it all worked, but Cruz frequently interrupted and explained things further. He had helped organize the museum, and the guide was clearly deferential to his interventions.

The tour ended very nicely. With a nod from Cruz, the young woman extracted a bottle of mescal from a desk drawer and poured two glasses. Cruz and I toasted each other and our shared appreciation of this moment that brought us together. Later, Cruz and I went down a small lane and entered what looked like someone’s private residence. They had a table in a back room and we had more mescal divided between a few beers. It did
not matter that it was ten o’clock in the morning or that I had to drive my rental car back along narrow mountain roads. I was engaged in fieldwork and I had to be a good researcher.

The mining museum sits near the actual mine, which is something of a relic itself. While machinery has been updated over the years, the exterior structures largely look as if they were built in the early twentieth century. The museum represents an effort by the workers and the community to tell their own story of industrial labor. It celebrates the workers of the community, the risks they took, the tools they used to work, and the equipment that kept them safe if it functioned properly. It is an object-centered museum, with just a few letters and documents recording the series of owners and the quantity of gold extracted from the mine. In this regard, the mining museum provides the context—or rather, the metarepresentational code—people need to situate themselves as members of the community or as outsiders walking through a place intended to invoke memory formation.

But the museum avoids any history of conflict that took place at the mine. No mention of the concern residents had that mining engineers had polluted the local river with cyanide. No account of the workers’ confrontation with mine owners over the right to extract a piece of ore for home processing. No story about the months of tension in the region when the owners installed an electrical fence around the property to keep people from taking their own chunks of ore. And no version of the night the workers burned down the company store after the company turned off the electricity to the fence.

The administration of this museum has joined with an international organization called Musesos Comunitarios. More conflicts are likely, as an international mining company has plans to extend mining in the region. In fact, Zapotecs have already started organizing against this dangerous expansion of mining that promises limited benefits for people of the region.

The Factory Ruins at Xía

In stark contrast to the mining museum, the factory ruins of a giant textile mill in the Xía Valley provide no guide to interpretation, no clues to how we should think about this place. In fact, many Zapotecs of the region do not know about the factory or the ruins, and those who do know are often reluctant to guide visitors to this site. The factory ruins sit on land claimed by more than one community, and access to the land remains somewhat contested. In the late nineteenth century, several hundred men and women worked here as wage laborers. They arrived by foot from neighboring towns and worked ten- to twelve-hour shifts, six days per week.
I have visited the ruins several times, and I am always struck by how the history of industrialization at this site has largely faded into the landscape, and the walls that remain appear out of place. The ruins do not tell about the numerous riots and armed conflicts that took place at the factory. Several times when armed confrontation threatened the region, Zapotec soldiers chose the Xía factory as the site to make a stand. The hills surrounding the valley offered strategic advantages, and the thick factory walls provided safe cover. Besides, if the factory was damaged or even destroyed, their homes and villages would still be safe. In fact, that is exactly how the textile factory came to an end. Zapotec soldiers formed a separatist sovereignty movement from 1915 to 1920. When a Constitutionalist army came to the Sierra to put down this rebellion, the Zapotecs occupied the textile factory. It was destroyed, and the British owners sued for damages but never received any payment.

I learned that last bit of the story after a great-great-granddaughter of the original owners contacted me about my work on the factory. She had found a reference I had made to Xía and sent me an e-mail asking for more information. We corresponded for several years, and after reading my book, which discussed the factory, she really only argued with me about two things: she complained that her family had never been paid for the damage done to the mill, and she did not believe that the mill owners had been preparing to move the operation to Oaxaca City when it was destroyed. I eventually guided her to the ruins using GoogleEarth. It had been her dream to visit this site, far from her home in Canada, closer to the photos and stories her grandmother had told her about this special place and special time in her family’s history. She made it to Xía and wrote to me about what she saw there—a confirmation of her family’s lost fortune, evidence of her family’s past importance when they mingled with local elites from all over Oaxaca, tangible reminders that the nostalgia her grandmother had passed on was worthwhile, real, and key to her own identity.

This woman died less than two years after her visit to Xía, and I have yet to reconnect with her children. She told me she had many photographs and documents, and so I will likely try to reach her family. Clearly, I see something different within these ruins than she did. And I also know that the people who now plant rows of corn within the walls of these ruins see something altogether different than I do.

My Zapotec Museum

Both of these sites of memory offer an alternative, unexpected history of the region that emphasizes wage labor and industrialization instead of subsis-
tence farming and economic isolation from the rest of the country. These places challenge the idea of “folkloric poverty,” which fixes Indian identity to subsistence farming and is inherently at odds with an industrializing, developing economy. Oaxacan distinctiveness is often explained as the product of cultural and economic resistance against modernity, a place stuck in time, “a living museum” of indigenous Mexico. But this picturesque version of Oaxaca rewrites the past and is instead a product of the 1930s and 1940s, when state officials turned toward tourism rather than industrialization as a source of economic growth. It was a perfect paradox: Oaxaca’s future tied to the indigenous past of monumental ruins, artisan commodities, and native cuisine, costumes, and dances.

The other history of Oaxaca, the one that might emphasize the early efforts at industrialization, is at odds with this new “old Oaxaca,” or Oaxaca antigua. Museums can be built upon museums, just as long as time stops and visitors have a way of understanding what they are supposed to see. I have encountered museums in unexpected places in Oaxaca: restaurants, bars, theaters, streets, homes, and hotels. I have even designed my own Zapotec museum within my historian’s imagination. It is here where I see how the magical power of industrial capitalism can erase memories and disguise violence. As Timothy Mitchell warns in Rule of Experts, capitalism tricks us by obscuring origins, imposing new regimes that pretend to be natural, and hiding acts of violence behind a cloak of so-called law, order, and modernity.

My museum would display the violence of a capitalist wage economy that exchanged labor power for money, which was itself possible because of the magic that transformed paper and coins into currency. Workers at the Natividad mine and the Xía textile factory always earned wages below the national average for the same work. Zapotec miners earned one peso per day compared to the three pesos per day earned in other parts of the country. In general, Mexican miners were paid according to nationality and ethnic identity, rated by the number of racially marked tons expected per day: “Americans loaded ten tons per day, Blacks eight tons, Italians six tons, Japanese five tons, Chinese four tons, and Mexicans only two tons.” Zapotec miners ranked even below “Mexicans.”

Similarly, Zapotec textile factory workers were paid well below the national average. Men at Xía earned 60 centavos per day, while women earned 40 centavos, both well below the national average of 1.25 pesos per day. They were even denied a new national minimum wage enacted in 1912, despite the participation of the Xía factory owner in writing that new legislation. Capital accumulation in the Sierra Zapoteca took advantage of the contradictions inherent in the geographic mobility of labor power.
talists want and do not want a free mobile labor force; laborers want and do not want to exercise their mobility for better wages and working conditions. “Capitalist development,” David Harvey argues, “must negotiate a knife-edge between preserving the values of past commitments made at a particular place and time, or devaluing them to open up fresh room for accumulation... The inner contradictions of capitalism are expressed through the restless formation and re-formation of geographical landscapes. This is the tune to which the historical geography of capitalism must dance without cease.”

My museum would also showcase the threat of capitalism to ethnic identity. Industrialization itself waged war against indigenous identity in Mexico—not really for individual workers, who could easily incorporate their own sense of being Zapotec with working for wages, but for the rest of the nation, particularly for state rulers. Industrial capitalism was categorically at odds with being “Indian.” Wage labor became a stick to beat out ethnic identity—to be “Indian” in Mexico implied subsistence farming, most often on communally owned lands. The owners of the Xía factory argued they did not have to pay workers according to the new minimum wage laws because the workers were really Indian campesinos. A Department of Labor inspector who came to investigate compliance with the 1912 minimum wage law was not fooled by the owner’s lie: “The workers are people who have always worked in the factories and are not, as the Administrators want me to believe, farmers and peasants. Almost all of them have small plots of land and rural houses, but they are laborers who know the work, which they have been doing for many years.” Still, the owner’s view that by definition Indians could not be real factory workers persisted for many years. In the 1940s, economist Wilbert E. Moore defined an Indian as someone “who speaks an Indian language, lives in a village, and cultivates maize in the traditional way.” He took this view to an illogical extreme when he argued: “There are no Indians in Mexican factories, although there are many persons in various industrial employments who were born in isolated villages and all of whose relatives are ‘Indian.’”

Finally, my Zapotec museum would shine a light on painful memories erased by a desire for a happy narrative. My museum emphasizes conflicts at the mine and the factory. The risks and hardships workers faced would be in bold outlines. Miners died in greater numbers at Natividad than in any other mine in the country, and other people died and were injured trying to extract chunks of ore for their own household production. The happy workers on display in the museum would be somber, dirty, and tired. If I could put my museum in the factory ruins I would document riots and worker unrest. I would talk about factory workers losing limbs, suffering...
abuse, and struggling to survive on extremely low wages. But, of course, this museum would reveal more about my own symbolic hostility toward capital accumulation and less about the people who worked there. I say symbolic because I do not have to work under such harsh conditions; symbolic because I do not have to live in the Sierra Zapoteca amid these sites; and symbolic because I can write about the violence of capitalism on my MacBook without fully reflecting on the violence embedded in the keyboard I use to type these words.

In the end, my museum would be at odds with the memories that Zapotec residents of Natividad and the farmers in the Xía Valley want to preserve. They want to tell a story of triumph over nature, of survival in the face of harsh working conditions caused by going underground and working for greedy owners. They want their neighbors and families to remember a happier history. Zapotecs would rather emphasize cooperation between owners and workers, a moment of economic prosperity or at least economic possibility. Their view is closer to that of the woman from Canada, even though this desire for a more uplifting narrative has a cost. The mill owner’s granddaughter saw private property, family inheritance, and individual engineering achievements credited to her distant relatives. Zapotecs want to hide the ruins. They have returned the land to its preindustrial purpose, but neighboring communities can still challenge their access to it. From their perspective, it is better to forget the factory ruins and to tell a story of accomplishment and survival at the mining museum.

If I take Basso seriously, then I need to remember that while I remain interested in Zapotec history, Zapotecs live in the present and remain tied to these sites of memory in ways that I will never fully understand or appreciate, since I do not live there or come from there. For that reason, Zapotecs are the best guides through their own history, and that is reason enough to toast their interpretation of the past with a good shot of mescal.

Notes

1 Patrick J. McNamara, Sons of the Sierra: Juárez, Díaz, and the People of Ixtlán, Oaxaca, 1855–1920 (Chapel Hill, NC, 2007).
3 Keith Basso, Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache (Albuquerque, NM, 1996).
For more on the notion of metarepresentationality, see Lisa Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (Columbus, OH, 2006), 55–72.


7 See Rebecca Overmyer-Velázquez, *Folkloric Poverty: Neoliberal Multiculturalism in Mexico* (University Park, PA, 2010), for a discussion of how indigenous Mexicans become tied to static notions of rural, agrarian poverty. Indians in Mexico can only be subsistence campesinos.

8 See McNamara, *Sons of the Sierra*, 15–16.


10 The magic involved in creating currency that can be used to commodify labor is discussed in Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (Chicago, 1987).


