

Mistaken Identities

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"The land belongs to those who toil it."

—Zapata

Maclovio Rojas was a very special young man of strong convictions and faith. He died as he walked in the corridor of power. I had a photograph of him, well, I thought it was, and I wanted to "rescue his image." I had never heard of an Indian from Oaxaca, other than two of our presidents, Juárez and Díaz, to have a community named after him/her. I spoke to the other members of the Border Arts Workshop (BAW) and we decided to visit the community and talk to the residents about painting a mural of Maclovio's image in their community center.

Jaime Cota is a labor right's organizer in Tijuana and member of the Frente Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (FZLN) the civilian support group of the EZLN. Members and sympathizers of the FZLN were the people who had built the original structure of the Aguascalientes in the Poblado Maclovio Rojas. The small structure and makeshift stage built out of garage doors and recycled wood, stood in the middle of the community. We approached Jaime Cota about doing the mural of Maclovio and he then took us to the Poblado and introduced us to Hortensia Hernández and Artemio Osuna.

The relationship began as Hortensia Hernández, leader and president of the base committee, was looking at the tiny 35 mm slide trying to figure out the person in the image. She liked the image and agreed with me that it looked like Maclovio Rojas. She was not sure, but she was sure that the person standing next to him was his brother. We had a long conversation about Maclovio Rojas and about the legal problems they were facing in the community. As she spoke, she pointed behind her at row upon row of stacked cargo containers, built by Hyundai Precision Co. and explained that the Korean maquiladora was encroaching on them and threatening to take the rest of their land. Three years before, Hyundai had relocated one of their manufacturing plants to Tijuana, as part of a Korean-México negotiation agreement, that ex-President Salinas de Gortari had signed to attract Asian investment into the border areas.

In 1993, Hyundai appropriated for free 100 hectares for storage and parking of their cargo containers establishing the second largest cargo container manufacturing plant in the world. The real estate surrounding this industrial park, once located on the outskirts and marginal areas of Tijuana was transformed through a Baja California State-sponsored development of the industrial-commercial infrastructure of the adjacent area to the Poblado Maclovio Rojas, and became highly coveted by land speculators.

An officially stamped invoice dated in 1991, issued by the federal Agrarian Reform Department is pasted on the wall of the Poblado's assembly hall. The document is proof that the Unión de Posesionarios del Poblado Maclovio Rojas Márquez, A.C., paid the government for the disputed 197 hectares. The Poblado has been steadily growing as additional families move in to the community and parcels are sub-divided into

single-family 336 sq. ft. lots. The majority of the houses are built with discarded garage doors and wood pallets, many houses, however, are now being built out of cinder block and mortar. The development of the commercial area next to the Hyundai storage area and the main highway now includes 2 PEMEX gas stations, mini-market and truck stop, a new furniture assembly maquiladora plant, and the former municipal slaughterhouse has now been turned into the Tijuana Police Academy. No joke.

The receipt shows that on 8/3/95 the Pobladores of Maclovio Rojas paid \$1,892.78 dollars, the value the federal agency had appraised at the time. Currently, the state officials have appraised the real estate at \$10.00 a square meter, making the 197 hectares polygon, currently occupied by the Maclovianos, worth 197 million dollars.

The image on the slide, although great in composition, had a dark shadow around the eyes caused by the rim of the hat. Unable to clear it electronically, we needed another photograph to get a better definition of his eyes. We came across Maclovio's brother, Lucio Rojas, during presidential candidate Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas presentation at Cal State University at San Marcos. The organizers of the event presented Lucio as one of the main catalysts of the organization of Mixteco-Zapoteca migrant farmworkers in San Diego's North County. When we approached him, he told us that his family was still living in San Quintín, and that he was going to travel there during the following Fourth of July holiday. We decided to visit and interview the Rojas family members to get an insight on Maclovio life and to secure a better photograph.

Travelling on the transpeninsular highway the 200 miles from the border south to San Quintín valley along the scenic Baja California coast, is both beautiful and treacherous. The valley began developing high yielding agro-industrial farming for export in 1980. As the Southern California suburban land rush was displacing farmland to the south, the fertile San Quintín valley became the yearlong supplier of vegetables to the north. This agricultural expansion required cheap farm labor. Mixteca Indians being expelled by poverty from their homelands in the state of Oaxaca, quickly met this demand. In 1985 almost 80,000 farmworkers were working in these tomato maquiladoras, while living in labor camps inside the grower's property. Maclovio's family had immigrated here in 1980, he joined them in 1984. By 1986, he had become a leader and president of the CIOAC, a national organization that was organizing a campaign to unionize the farmworkers. As many leaders before him, he was faced with an enormous task, there has never been an independent union of farmworkers in México, Maclovio gave his life for this cause. He was run over by a truck as he crossed the highway, the murder was ordered by a grower, a rival Mixteca leader carried out the killing. He was killed on the 4th of July 1987.

We arrived two days after the 9th anniversary of his death and interviewed the family. They invited us to the unveiling of the community's museum and celebration. As I was presenting the enlarged and framed photograph to his older brother Jose, he paused for what seemed an hour. Trying to find words, he politely thanked me for my good intentions and said that, unfortunately, it was not a picture of his brother Maclovio, but it was instead his uncle Fausto. And indeed, the other person in the photograph was his brother Lucio. The embarrassment was eased when they kindly provided us with the only photograph they had of Maclovio, a photo taken on the day of his marriage.

Hyundai and the struggle for independent unions

We decided to extend our original idea of painting the mural of Maclovio's image, that we needed to explore the idea of a long-term project with both the San Quintín communities as well as in Tijuana.

We travelled to the Hyundai plant near the Poblado Maclovio Rojas to witness the initiation ceremony of an independent union of the workers. Months before, there had been a workers' initiative to organize in plants that were subcontracting to Hyundai. The movement had been squashed and the leaders fired. The meeting was held in a half-built structure adjacent to the main Hyundai plant, about 20 workers pledged and signed the union cards. Unbeknown to all of us present at this meeting, Hortensia, Artemio and Juan Regalado were arrested by Baja California State Judicial police on their way to the meeting. The police laid-in-wait, and were actually waiting for Hortensia to leave the community to apprehend her on trumped up charges of illegal possession of property and damages to private property. The next day the radio newscasts were reporting their arrest as we began another chapter in our collaborative process.

We immediately travelled to Tijuana's state government offices to document the protest by the residents of Maclovio and supporters from other communities, and several of Tijuana's labor and human rights activists. The protesters were hoping that the issue of the arrests of the community's leaders would be resolved in Tijuana, thus avoiding the need to travel to the State's capital in Mexicali 120 miles away to deal with their freedom. The local representatives of the governor of Baja California failed to resolve the issue, the leadership then resolved to march to Mexicali on September 4, 1996 to demand the freedom of the three compañeros.

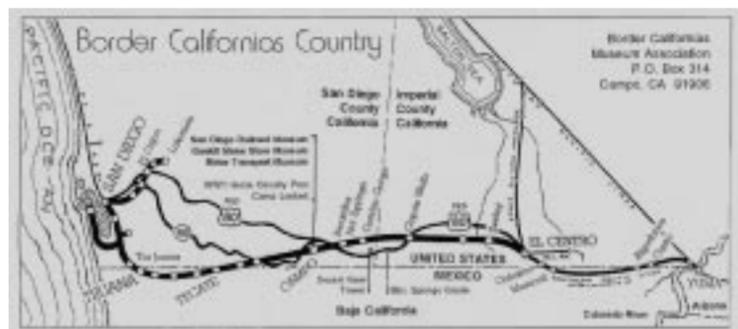
La Marcha por la Libertad

Wednesday morning, September 4, 1996. The main plaza of the Poblado Maclovio Rojas was full of people. Women and children milling around, painting banners and signs, preparing their bodies and souls for the road ahead, packing food, water, and hydrolyzed serum donated by supporters. Their resolve was strong: they would march to meet face to face with the governor of Baja California. Highway 2 will take the marchers through the 5,500 feet Sierra Juárez pass, down the Rumorosa grade to the Laguna Salada 110 feet below sea level, where temperatures can climb to 115 degrees at midday.

Over 300 people began the march, the corridor of power waited for no one, not even freedom marchers. The madness grew intense, impatient horns blasted through the morning sun; a massive traffic jam backed up for miles. Dirt and smoke filtered the colors flying in the sky.

One marcher, Rubén Hernández died while crossing the desert. The Maclovianos pledged to return a year later to the place where he died, and erected a monument in his honor and for Freedom.

These events—the arrests of the leadership and the protest march, transformed the collaborative process from the networking phase of exchanging information, to a coordinating phase in which our inter-activities were considerably altered. BAW participated in the march, providing direct support to the marchers and by video documenting the event. BAW contacted support groups and several NGOs in San Diego, primarily the American



Friends Service Committee (AFSC) and their local US-México Border Program, who then contacted others in the network of transborder social justice and solidarity groups in the region.

A marcher died of dehydration in the sweltering heat of the Mexicali desert; Hortensia Hernández spent 3 months in the infamous La Mesa State Penitentiary as a political prisoner; these events transformed the new symbols for BAW's aesthetic quest.

Out of Line and Beyond Borders

The Support Committee of Maquiladora Workers (SCMW) a non-profit NGO based in San Diego began seeking support from the national network via alerts and developed a letter writing campaign to demand from the Baja California and México City governments the freedom of the compañeros.

The SCMW has, for many years solicited resources to maintain full time organizers in Tijuana, financial resources were provided to the compañeros in Maclovio Rojas to support their legal defense fund. The SCMW kept providing direct support by organizing fundraising NAFTA tours in the Poblado. Busloads of activists from the Southern California region visited Maclovio for lunch and fact finding activities to discover the effects of NAFTA in the border region. Currently, the SCMW continues to have close ties with the AFL-CIO and other US labor organizations that have opposed NAFTA.

An article by Julio Laboy published in the front page of the *Wall Street Journal* (California section) in 2/2/97, detailed the "friends within the belly of the monster," that have supported the struggle in Maclovio Rojas. The image of Hortensia Hernández also appeared on the front page, with a caption referring to her as Sub-Comandante Hortensia. The reference to the EZLN made Hyundai corporate officers and Susan Golding San Diego's Republican mayor quite nervous. The local representative of Hyundai expressed concern about doing business in a hostile environment and the possibility of relocating the plant that produces \$50 million dollars a year. The article, although important for getting the attention of the corporate investors by pointing out the strong support from within the US, misleads the reader by making a reference to Hernández as being part of the political arm of the EZLN. The week after the article was published both Hortensia Hernández, the Poblado's committee and Hyundai's officers corrected the article in the local newspapers. In a press conference conducted in the Poblado, Hernández made it clear—the residents of Maclovio Rojas support and identify with the struggle being waged by the EZLN and the indigenous communities in Chiapas. The Poblado's organization, however, does not represent the political arm of the Zapatistas, in fact there is no official "political arm" of the EZLN.

Hyundai also conducted a press conference to deny any attempts by the corporation to take over any of the land belonging to Maclovio. After the *Wall Street Journal* article, the cargo containers that were stored, stacked three-high next to the Poblado, were removed and only a couple of hundred of them still remain in the lot.

The SCMW turned its attention to supporting the efforts of the Han Young (a subsidiary of Hyundai) workers working to organize an independent union. Several of the original leaders of the Han Young workers who began the organizing effort were residents of the Poblado Maclovio Rojas. There is ample documentation of the Han Young worker's struggle, it has reached worldwide renown through many publications, specifically *Z Magazine* and articles by free-lance writer David Bacon.

Engagement and Cooperation

During this time, BAW was constructing its annual "Border Realities XI" installation at the Centro Cultural de la Raza, in San Diego. This depicted

the resistance and struggle of Maclovio Rojas. Members of the base committee of the Poblado were invited to the opening and spoke at the event, the following week we were invited by Artemio Osuna to meet and begin discussions concerning our community engagement project in Maclovio.

BAW was invited to participate in *inSite '97* a triennial transborder public art festival. By securing funding, first from a grant from Installation Gallery, we were able to transform the collaborative relationship into a cooperation phase and commit to a long-term project. The *inSite* triennial festivals are funded by several institutional governmental sources that are funnelled through Installation Gallery. The festivals are organized with the participation of many of the regional IGOs and NGOs including corporate, social and political, also the regional galleries and museums. BAW then obtained a grant from the US/México Fund for Culture that enabled us to extend the terms of our project and to move beyond the initial phase that was funded for the *inSite '97* Festival.

BAW began negotiations with the community's leadership as to the nature and context of our participation in the community, which asked for more frequent visits. We requested an area in the community to build a storage space in order to keep materials and equipment. A decision was made to provide a space in the area of the Aguascalientes. Artemio Osuna explained that the Aguascalientes' area of the community was intended to house regional organizations so they could establish their outreach offices. BAW presented a design of a two-story building made out of discarded wooden garage doors. The base committee decided to build with cinder block, to insure longevity and security. The wooden garage doors originally acquired to build the center were used to line the perimeter of the area and were painted with murals depicting the community's struggle and history. Included in the murals was our original intent to paint the image of Maclovio Rojas at the top of the stage area. It took the Workshop exactly one year from the time of the initial negotiations with the base committee to finish the construction of the center. The Aguascalientes was inaugurated on July 4, 1998, to commemorate the 11th anniversary of Maclovio Rojas' death.

The Artist as a Vehicle for Community Action

The Aguascalientes in the Poblado Maclovio Rojas was built in the spirit of the EZLN's Aguascalientes. Currently, there are five Aguascalientes in Chiapas. The insurgent army built the Aguascalientes with the mission to serve as a place to develop a culture of resistance, and to serve as the actual links to the outside civil society. La sociedad civil: Indigenous peoples, students, workers, community associations, gays and lesbians, barzonistas (bankrupt native mid-range commerce and industrial entrepreneurs that got hit by the Peso financial crisis), old school leftists and new age rock stars, housewives, scholars, linking a global consciousness to a local and national democratic movement. The Aguascalientes in Oventic, one of the Zapatista's autonomous municipalities in Chiapas, is being built through a collaborative project between the Oventic community and San Diegans for Peace with Dignity in México. Peter Brown, one of the organizers of this group, a

long time border activist and school teacher was deported last year by Mexican immigration officials for violating sovereignty laws. He continues to organize caravans of delegations from San Diego to Chiapas.

The EZLN conducted a National Consultation campaign during March 1999, 5000 indigenous militants mobilized and travelled from their Chiapas communities throughout the entire scope of the Mexican country seeking feedback from the civil society. The EZLN militants surveyed the population on questions of indigenous rights and

their opinion concerning the implementation of the San Andrés Larrainzar Accords. The militants also asked for support to end the war of extermination being waged by the government against their people. The government has refused to comply to their agreement with the EZLN. Such Accords called for the Regional Autonomy and the Self-Governance of the Indigenous peoples throughout México. During the campaign a delegation of EZLN militants met with the Maclovio Rojas community in the Aguascalientes and established mutual concerns in their particular struggles.

A delegation of 19 members visited the Tijuana-Tecate Border region and a highly significant event and piece of border art happened during the visit to the region. The EZLN organized the campaign by sending an equal number of women and men, in Tijuana 9 couples and one child, visited and met with a wide array of groups. Events were organized by a transborder coordinating committee that brought together organizations and constituencies that usually don't work together. The delegation listened to speakers dealing with regional issues and received solidarity declarations from organizations throughout Southern California.

For obvious security reasons, the delegation could not obtain visas or otherwise to cross the border, so a demonstration event was organized along the 12 foot fence, in an area where the transborder NAFTA train has a crossing gate. Scaffolding was set up to install a platform high enough so that supporters on the other side of the fence could see and hear the EZLN speakers.

The role of the artist

BAW's role in this community, as artists and cultural workers, is continuously redefined. The initial role was to link the community's struggle to the outside by documenting and producing work to create a public consciousness and to prevent a violent removal of the pobladores by government forces. The last government attempt to forcefully evict them happened on February 28, 1998.

Through BAW's network in Southern California we are able to create alerts and mobilize support. The leadership of the Poblado wants to develop formal transborder alliances, that would include community activists from the Orange County Friends of Maclovio Rojas, the Green Party, CISPES in Los Angeles, and other activists and grassroots organizations, and BAW acting in the role of transborder inside/outside facilitators.

BAW facilitates solidarity and working delegations to the Poblado. The Orange County Friends of Maclovio Rojas through fundraising purchased a towing trailer to transport garage doors and building materials. The American Friends Service Committee sends annual delegations from their youth program for a week-long stay for community work projects. Global Exchange also brings a youth program. Recently, two French scholars spent a 6 week long residency in the center producing a documentary for French TV. An Australian graduate student is working on a performance-based research project; and a Brazilian artist is developing a summer-long residency and community event planned for this year, for the *inSite 2000* Festival.

Long Term Commitment

Through the 12 years the Maclovio Rojas have kept alive their movement and struggle for the land and the development of their community, they have increased their potential and capacity for self-governing having taken up their own plans for their families and neighbors.

In spite of it all—jails, attacks, threats and divisive actions taken by the government against their organization—the Maclovianos realize that it's up to them to develop the infrastructure of the Poblado.

A longer version of this article together with a web project documenting the BAW project can be found at: <http://www.geocities.com/zopilotl.geo/img001.html>

