Entanglements:
Volkswagen de México and Global Capitalism

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Anthropology
University of Toronto

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Abstract

This dissertation is an ethnographic study of global capitalism. It examines the multilayered presence of Volkswagen de México to grapple with the double-edged sword of transnational economic dependencies. Car manufacturing in Mexico has created jobs for a number of college graduates, middle class status, modes of relationality and care, and even the possibility to migrate to Germany. At the same time global car production relies on a large number of low-wage and uncertain jobs, on mechanisms that make labor cheap and discipline the labor force, as well as on land and water dispossession. While Volkswagen de México is a medium of inclusivity into 21st century global capitalism, it has also created contentious relations on the ground: among those who celebrate the presence of the factory, those who oppose it, those who have been violently excluded, and among unionized and non-unionized workers. To elucidate this complex and convoluted landscape of social relations, this study examines how transnational car production intersects with processes of nation-state formation, local ideas about status, and personal aspirations, as well as the conjunctures between global transformations, manufacturing, and the North American Free Trade Agreement. This dissertation shows how Volkswagen’s car
economy has endured through forms of domination, subjugation and accommodation, and traces its not-always-predictable effects on the ground. Thereby it offers a nuanced and textured account of how global capitalism is constituted trans-locally.
Acknowledgments

This dissertation would not have been possible without the people who allowed me to be part of fragments of their everyday lives. So to begin with, I want to thank the members of the Beetle car club Aircooled Puebla, in particular Gonzalo, Liz, Iker, Edgar, Charly, Fanny, Victor, Luis, and Yuri who accepted and welcomed my presence as a quasi-member and as an anthropologist alike. Almost every Friday, I joined them on a parking lot that belongs to one of Puebla’s busiest malls where I heard life-stories of Beetles and their drivers. Other times I would cruise with them through the city or share dinners or meals during the weekend. I also want to thank the other Beetle car clubs in Mexico that welcomed me, as well as the Beetle fans whom I met at the various events that are organized to celebrate the Beetle throughout Mexico.

I am equally grateful to the members of El Frente de Pueblos por la Tierra y el Agua region Puebla, as well as the Volkswagen workers who, after overcoming their initial distrust, allowed me to attend their meetings and events, and shared their own archives with me. To protect their identities, I cannot name them expect for Juan, the spokesperson and visible face of El Frente, who is often mistakenly taken to be the leader of this peasant-activist group. Juan is a known figure to the media and the government and has been incarcerated for El Frente’s political work.

Besides my interlocutors in the field, I want to first and foremost thank those who have guided me on my academic journey. Without the support of Professor Susan Besse, I would have likely never gone to graduate school. Susan was my mentor during my undergraduate years in the CUNY Baccalaureate Program and, since then, has become a friend. She guided me to majoring in History. Susan also recruited me to the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship
Program (MMUF), a program that aims at increasing diversity in higher education. MMUF has supported me throughout the undergraduate and then the PhD years not only through fellowships but also by providing mentorship and creating a sense of community through weekend-long retreats, conferences and social gatherings. Also during my undergrad years in New York City, Professor Marc Edelman was my mentor while I was taking classes at Hunter College. It is from Professor Edelman that I learned what Anthropology can offer to the understanding of Latin America. This dissertation has been possible with the support of the Wenner Gren Foundation, the Social Science Research Council of Canada and The John Hope Franklin Dissertation Fellowship from the American Philosophical Society.

At the University of Toronto, I am grateful to the late Professor Krystyna Sciecichowicz who was one of my advisors when I transferred to this university from the Graduate Center. I also want to express my gratitude to my committee members Andrea Muehlebach, Christopher Krupa, Shiho Satsuka, the external reader Casey Walsh, and, in particular, my advisor Valentina Napolitano for her encouragement over the years, for reading drafts that were not even proofread yet, for giving me the last push that I needed to finish this dissertation, as well as for her excitement about my work. The writing group led by Professor Michael Lambek not only pushed me to write and share my work but also allowed me to learn about how to provide feedback to my colleagues as well as how to make the most of the generous feedback that was given to me. I want to thank the Centre for Ethnography at the University of Toronto, Scarborough Campus, and especially Professor Donna Young, for the semester-long fellowship and for giving me the opportunity to present my work. I thank Secil Dagtas, Asli Zengin, Vivian Solana, Jacob Nerenberg, Grant Otsuki, Katie Kilroy-Marac, Nicole Rigillo, Timothy Makory, Columba Gonzalez Duarte, Daniella Jofre, Stephen Campbell, Chantelle Falconer, Aaron Kappeler, Yesenia Ruiz Cortes, and Preeti Sampat for their friendship and for engaging with my work at
some point along the way. To Sarah Williams for her immense help proofreading and editing the dissertation so quickly.

For showing me another side of anthropological research in Mexico, I thank Isabel Maldonado, Caro Gonzalez and Ulises Castro whom I met through the graduate seminar Seminario de Teoria Critica y Subjectividad in the Anthropology Department at the Universidad Autonoma de Puebla. To my long time friend Jose Luis, I’m grateful for our conversations, for giving me the opportunity to participate in his architecture seminars, as well as for being a companion and my neighbor throughout my time in the field. I thank la familia Jaspeado Escalona for renting me the studio where I lived for fourteen months and for inviting me to join some of their family gatherings. I thank the Mittermaier and Hein family for welcoming me in Germany and la familia Tellez del Toro for welcoming me in Xalapa, Veracruz. For their support for just about any idea and project that I have come up with since I was young, I thank la familia González Godinez and Tia Yola, as well as my siblings, Nohemi, Valeria and Beto and his family, Ivon and his daughter Sofia. All my gratitude to my parents Adalberto González Tapia and Yolanda Jiménez Marín for buying me that ticket to New York City almost twenty years ago, which led me to return to college and eventually to get a PhD, as well as for their support and excitement about what I do. Last but not least, I’m thankful to Amira for all her support, excitement, ideas and encouragement all the years we have been together and for suggesting a writing retreat as well as for putting up with me working on weekends starting at 4 a.m. Finally, I’m grateful to my son Felix for his smiles, happiness and for teaching me to be in the present. It is to Felix that I dedicate this dissertation.
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## Abbreviations

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AMIA</td>
<td>Asociación Mexicana de la Industria Automotriz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BUAP</td>
<td>Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAIN</td>
<td>Colectivo de Arte Independiente</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRS</td>
<td>Corporate Social Responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CTM</td>
<td>Confederación de Trabajadores de Mexico</td>
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<tr>
<td>EOI</td>
<td>Export Oriented Industrialization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EZLN</td>
<td>Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FEMSA</td>
<td>Fomento Económico Mexicano, S.A.B. de C.V.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FESEBES</td>
<td>Federación de Sindicatos de Empresas de Bienes y Servicios</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HYLSA</td>
<td>Hojalata y Lámina, S.A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IFAI</td>
<td>Instituto Federal de Acceso a la Información (Federal Institute for Access to Public Information)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ITESM</td>
<td>Instituto Tecnológico de Monterrey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISI</td>
<td>Import Oriented Industrialization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KIS</td>
<td>Internationales Solidaritätskomitee (International Solidarity Committee)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MORENA</td>
<td>Movimiento de Regeneración Nacional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NAFIN</td>
<td>Nacional Financiera</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NAFTA</td>
<td>North American Free Trade Agreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAN</td>
<td>Partido de Acción Nacional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PEMEX</td>
<td>Petróleos Mexicanos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POS</td>
<td>Poder Sindical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acronym</td>
<td>Full Name</td>
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<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRI</td>
<td>Partido Revolucionario Institucional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROCEDE</td>
<td>Program for the Certification of Ejidal Rights and Titling of Urban Plots</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SITIAVW</td>
<td>Sindicato Independiente de Trabajadores de la Industria Automotriz, Similares y Conexos Volkswagen de México</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UIA</td>
<td>Universidad Iberoamericana, Campus Puebla</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UDLAP</td>
<td>Universidad de las Américas, Puebla</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UPAEP</td>
<td>Universidad Popular Autónoma de Puebla</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UOI</td>
<td>Unidad Obrera Independiente</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TNC</td>
<td>Transnational Capital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VW</td>
<td>Volkswagen</td>
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Figure 1. A car club member displaying his *vocho* at the annual Beetle celebration *Vochofiesta*.

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It is 7 a.m., and we are entering Mexico City. Instead of the usual chaos of cars, public transportation buses, motorcycles, and trucks that are the norm in Mexico’s capital, on this Sunday morning we are driving along eerily empty wide avenues. We – a caravan of ten old Volkswagen Beetles – have travelled two hours from the city of Puebla to celebrate el Día Mundial del Vocho (International Beetle day). Every year on July 31st, members of the car clubs Aircooled Puebla and Vochoclub Tlaxcala polish, drive, and display their Beetles to commemorate a special anniversary. On this day eight years ago, the last Beetle rolled off of Volkswagen’s assembly lines in Puebla. After more than thirty years, during which Volkswagen de México had become the only Volkswagen factory manufacturing Beetles, the original Beetle’s production came to an end in 2003. Yet, rather than a nostalgic day of remembrance, every July 31st thousands of people from all over Mexico come together to celebrate what they call the “never ending story of the car of the people.”

Taking a cue from this event, this dissertation describes the multilayered presence of Volkswagen in Mexico. It traces how the Beetle and its manufacturer, Volkswagen de México, have come to hold a special place in Mexico. This German transnational car corporation is located in the city of Puebla, two hours south of Mexico City and the fourth largest city in Mexico. For fifty years, the factory has been manufacturing cars, but over the years, it has also produced far more than cars. It has become an intimate part of the city’s imaginaries and affections, tapping into visions of progress and globalization as well as shaping people’s lives and aspirations. Parallel to car production’s status since the 1960s as a preferred path to economic development, Volkswagen de México has become deeply intertwined with Mexico’s shifting visions and projects of development.
Over the years, the Volkswagen factory has opened a wide range of possibilities at different levels. Volkswagen car manufacturing has contributed to situate Mexico as the seventh largest car producer in the world, and Volkswagen in Mexico is the second largest car producer of the Volkswagen Consortium, after Germany, as well as the third largest car producer in North America. Volkswagen car production has meant jobs for a large number of Mexicans at Volkswagen and with the more than seventy suppliers (including maquiladoras) that support the car economy in Puebla.¹ The factory has also created global connections, as people working for Volkswagen de México travel to Germany for training or even to take jobs with Volkswagen Wolfsburg or Audi Ingolstadt.² Volkswagen car production also opened the possibility of literal mobility to many Mexicans. To this day, the factory is celebrated for manufacturing the old Beetle – a beloved car that has become intimately entwined with people’s lives in Mexico. Even though the production of this car has ended, the vocho, as the Beetle is affectionately called in Mexico, continues to be a ubiquitous object in the urban and rural landscapes. And along with Volkswagen de México being heralded as an example of “Mexican industries,” the old Beetle is described as “a very Mexican car.”

The presence of Volkswagen in Mexico, however, is tied to land and water dispossession, as well as precarious labor conditions. To build the factory and its subsequent expansions as well as to build the factories supplying Volkswagen – all part of the infrastructure that supports Puebla’s car economy – hundreds of hectares of land formerly belonging to peasants were

¹ In total, there are 250 Volkswagen suppliers in Mexico
² The Volkswagen Consortium is composed of Audi, Bugatti, Lamborghini, Porsche, SEAT, Skoda and Volkswagen, as well as the Ducati Motorcycles and commercial vehicles MAN, Scania, Neoplan and Volkswagen Commercial Vehicles.
expropriated. Additionally, car production requires large amounts of water, causing the drying up of aquifers, lakes, wetlands, and springs. While Volkswagen originally arrived in Mexico in 1964 at least partly because the country was considered to have a “growing market for cars” (Bennett and Sharpe 1985) and, as in other places in Latin America, car production tapped into the aspiration of consuming technological artifacts that were associated with progress (Wolfe 2010), today the presence of this transnational corporation is tied to artificially low wages and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which has made labor conditions even more precarious in Mexico.

This dissertation grapples with the double-edged sword of Volkswagen’s car economy in Puebla. Car production creates jobs, forms of care, middle class status, and the possibility of migration to Germany, and thus is a medium of inclusion into 21st century global capitalism. It also creates modes of relationality between Volkswagen and employees, among Volkswagen workers, as well as among those who today celebrate the Beetle. Over the years, as the opening vignette suggests, affectionate attachments to Volkswagen and the Beetle have emerged. However, car production relies on labor exploitation and unequal exchanges. Over the years, the car economy has been made possible via land and water dispossessions, which have implications for peasants’ livelihoods as they disrupt economies and ways of being. Thus while Volkswagen’s car economy offers possibilities and opportunities, these are always produced in tandem with exclusions and the subjugation of autoworkers and peasants, and shaped by physical, legal, and subtle forms of violence. I approach the double-edged sword of Volkswagen’s car economy as a

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3 I use ‘infrastructure’ not as an analytic lens (Larkin 2013) but rather in its regular meaning, namely to refer to the basic physical structures and facilities needed for the operation of a society or enterprise.

4 While Bennett and Sharpe do not deny that “cheap labor” was a feature in Latin America at the time and that the auto industry benefitted from this fact, they argue that this was not the key rationale behind the car industries’ move to Mexico, Brazil or Argentina in the 1960’s.
complex relationship where a wide range of possibilities and opportunities are entangled with multidimensional and polyvalent relationships of exploitation, domination, and subjugation.

**Entanglements**

By focusing on the double-edged sword of Volkswagen’s car economy, I seek to ethnographically circumvent a question that I was asked recently by the Associated Vice President of a North American university when I told him about my research: “So is it good or bad for Mexico to be one of the largest global car manufacturers?” The framework of entanglements disrupts this very question.

I borrow the concept of ‘entanglement’ from anthropological examinations of the Anthropocene. As a conceptual framework, ‘entanglement’ highlights interdependencies and interrelationalities. In their critical review of anthropological engagements with the Anthropocene, Hannah Gibson and Sita Venkateswar (2015) argue that ‘entanglement,’ as a conceptual apparatus, is deployed to rupture Western dichotomies such as nature/culture, human/nonhuman, and self/other, and to instead bring to the forefront interconnected relationships between humans and other life forms. By highlighting interconnection, ethnographic research deploying the concept of ‘entanglement’ questions the hierarchical construction that has historically placed the human above all other life forms.

As Gibson and Venkateswar (2015) show, anthropological research using the notion of ‘entanglement’ is varied and uses different bodies of literature. Donna Haraway’s concept of ‘natureculture’ and her work on companion species, for instance, focuses on the interdependence and interactions of humans and other species (microbial, digestive, genetic and ecological) to show how all these species “become.” Humans in Haraway’s work are one more cohabiter in this
world (Haraway 1991; 2003). Another major theoretical approach deploying the concept of ‘entanglement’ is Posthumanism. Like Haraway’s Naturculture, Posthumanism considers the place of nonhumans as well as other ways of being and being in the world. Yet, unlike Haraway, ethnographic research using this approach focuses on how alternative subjectivities are constituted. A third major theoretical approach draws from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987) to elucidate processes of “becoming animal.” Ethnographic research drawing from this theoretical approach emphasizes multiplicities and ongoing processes of becoming rather than just a static being (e.g., Birke and Parisi 1999; Bradotti 2013).

I borrow the concept of ‘entanglement’ from these various literatures to highlight interdependences and interrelationalities that have been constituted by Volkswagen’s car economy over the years and to illustrate the complexity of global car production in Mexico. Entanglement here brings to the forefront a complex and complicated relationship between (and within) the various social worlds connected to Volkswagen de México. In this dissertation I connect ‘entanglement’ with a fourth theoretical approach, that of ‘dependency theory,’ in order to trace not so much a new form of dependent development but rather to gesture towards an alternative history and genealogy of capital in Mexico. Entanglement continues pushing away from simple dualities and evolutionary certainties. Yet, interdependences and interrelationalities in the context of this dissertation are not only those between “the core” and “the periphery,” nor are they only political or economic. These are also embedded within the history of Mexico as a modern nation-state.

The par excellence example of the kinds of entanglements that this dissertation traces is how jobs in car manufacturing are entangled with land dispossession. This is not a simple causal relationship. Rather, “jobs” and “economic growth” were key rationales for expropriating land – particularly land in the form of ejido, a form of social property, and minifundio, a smallholding
of land for subsistence. Land expropriation for ‘jobs’ has bound up the lives of peasants with those of autoworkers and college graduates. Examining their relationship though the lens of entanglement illuminates not only a contentious relationship driven by a class project but more significantly also shows how global car manufacturing has coalesced with processes of nation-state formation, processes that carry within them older histories of domination and subjugation of peasants and indigenous people in Mexico.

This entanglement brings to light conflicting notions of what constitutes the “people” – or rather el pueblo. Concretely, creating the infrastructure for Volkswagen’s car economy meant the dispossession of land from indigenous peasants through the legal mechanism (and state discourse) of utilidad pública. ‘Public utility’ was deployed under the rationale of “jobs” and “economic growth.” While there is already a contradiction between the making of el pueblo and its simultaneous disruption through the notion of the ‘public,’ this contradiction becomes even more complex when we consider the fact that car manufacturing and the entire car economy have created different kinds of jobs. A large number of them are low-paying jobs in maquiladoras and on the assembly lines but there are also better-paying jobs for those who have access to college and graduate education as well as German and English language training. To think about this entanglement and the disruption of el pueblo – a heterogeneous rural entity – along with the creation of jobs for el pueblo – a heterogeneous urban entity –, I put the creation of Volkswagen’s car economy in conversation with the troubled history of ejido land in Mexico. I do so in part because ejido land was expropriated to build the factory but also because the ejido exemplifies the kinds of entanglements that this dissertation examines: a complex relationship constituted by, and enabling, forms of domination and subjugation coexisting with forms of accommodation and resistance. Thus the framework of entanglement illuminates how Volkswagen’s car economy in
Mexico has inextricably tied up possibilities and opportunities with dispossessions and the rationale of ‘cheap labor.’

By focusing on entanglements, I delve into the power relations shaping and constituting global capitalism. While this focus has long characterized studies of imperialism, world-systems and dependency, this dissertation illustrates the dynamic interplay between different scales, ranging from the everyday to the global. The framework of entanglements sheds light on the conundrums accompanying processes of global capitalism and nation-state formation as it brings into view different groups of people in relation to these processes in the same locale. The framework of entanglements illuminates the ways in which Volkswagen’s car economy has endured through forms of domination, subjugation and accommodation. Entanglements in this dissertation are multilayered and multidimensional. Significantly, this dissertation also examines the open-ended and unexpected consequences of the entangled relationships constituting Volkswagen’s economy. As such, it elucidates how Volkswagen’s car manufacturing has also created an alternative relationship between people and ‘nature’ mediated through labor and how it has become a medium for imagining new forms of solidarity.

Producing Cars and Crafting Subjects

I situate my examination of Volkswagen’s car production in Mexico within the larger field of economic anthropology as it seeks to contribute to studies of commodity production in Latin America (Coronil 1997; Mintz 1985; Nash 1978; Ortiz 1995; Roseberry 1983; Trouillot 1988; Steward et.al. 1956; Soluri 2001; Topik and Wells 1998; Wolf 1982); and within the anthropology of Mexico (Ferry 2005; Rothstein 2007; Walsh 2008; Walsh et al. 2003; Weaver 2012). Whereas these studies have focused on agricultural commodities such as coffee, cocoa,
bananas, grapes, cotton, maize, henequen, tobacco, and sugar; on the small-scale extraction of silver; the petty production of clothes; and processes of commodification, this dissertation focuses on the paradigmatic commodity of industrial capitalism: the car.

Car production involves industrial manual labor and is capital- and labor-intensive as well as mediated by a wage relationship.\(^5\) Drawing on previous studies on commodity production, this dissertation turns the focus on the social relations embedded in the production of Volkswagen cars and the relationships that are constituted by this production. As such, this dissertation contributes to an examination of the ways in which people and “localities are drawn together into larger political, economic, social, and ideological systems […] in the context of capitalism” (Walsh and Ferry 2001:1).

The social relations of commodity production are shaped by a field of power relations. Drawing on Michel Foucault and Karl Marx, anthropologist Eric Wolf draws attention to the forms of power that organize and orchestrate the power of capital “to harness and allocate labor power” (1990:586). “Structural power,” Wolf writes,

shapes the field of action [and it] constrains, inhibits or promotes what people do, or cannot do, within the scenarios [that anthropologists study]. The notion of structural power allows [delineating] how the forces of the world impinge upon […] people […] This is not purely an economic relation, but a political one as well: it takes clout to set up, clout to maintain, and clout to defend (ibid. 587).

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\(^5\) That peasants are not involved in a wage relation does not make rural commodity production less exploitable. In peasant coffee production, surplus value is generated through an intensified use of unpaid family labor extracted from producers through market mechanisms (Sesia 2001:4; Roseberry 1983; Wolf 1966).
Structural power in relation to Mexico’s car production has been constituted by the dependency on transnational corporations and today also on NAFTA. “Dependency,” anthropologist Claudio Lomnitz writes, “implies domination […], the routinization of a power relationship (2012:352). To put it differently, economic relations are also power relations of exploitation, domination and subjugation (Edelman 1994: 60; Foucault 1982). Different modalities of ‘structural power’ have shaped histories of colonialism and neocolonialism, the histories that have formed Latin America (Coronil 1995:xvi). Colonial conquest didn’t bring colonies into the “international trade through the accidental discovery of new opportunities. They were created for trade and surplus, according to the European mercantilist design” (Trouillot 1988:22). Colonial histories are histories of African and indigenous labor extraction, land dispossession, global commodity production, racialization, the production of Otherness, and the (re)production of empire (Coronil 1995; Mintz 1985; Ortiz 1995[1947]; Wolf 1982).

Colonial histories run through a spectrum of categories dividing the world. Modernization and development theory divided the world into ‘modern’ and ‘traditional,’ an evolutionary framework that suggested that ex-colonies would one day reach the ‘development stage’ of empires. Although by the 1960s and 1970s the concept of ‘dependent development’ challenged the evolutionary framework of modernization and development theory by arguing for the “coproduction of development and underdevelopment, and therefore [for] Latin America’s contemporaneity with the metropole” (Lomnitz 2012: 350), the ‘three world category’ (Pletsch1981), and more recently terms such as ‘developed’ and ‘developing countries’ continue to reproduce the older evolutionary framework. These categories continue to construct certain places as sites where cheap labor is “found” and where commodified natural resources can be extracted.
Claudio Lomnitz argues that it would be more useful today to conceptualize Latin America through a lens of “new dependencies” (Lomnitz 2012:349) in order to locate the region in time and as a political site. The concept of “new dependencies” implies the fragmentation of interests and the formation of new alliances (ibid). In this dissertation, I draw on Lomnitz’s concept of “new dependencies” to bring to the forefront a wide spectrum of power relations shaping Mexico’s global car economy. This spectrum is partially shaped by trade relations, specifically NAFTA. While it is sometimes debated whether Mexico belongs to North America (ibid), NAFTA has entrenched its geo-political location. NAFTA also makes the U.S. a stable reference point since the majority of commodities manufactured in Mexico are exported there. In Mexico new dependencies are also shaped through the ways in which the national economy and livelihoods depend on transnational corporations.

Thus, besides examining how new dependencies are constituted, this dissertation contributes to studies of commodity production by de-centering the factory and delving into a wide range of interconnected productions, reconfigurations, reproductions, disruptions, and fragmentations. I examine the political economy of the production of space and place, the reconfiguration of labor relations in the post-NAFTA era and the reproduction of rationales that have shaped global car production. I also pay attention to social fragmentations within and outside the factory, and the ways of being that were and are disrupted by the car economy. I delve into the imaginaries surrounding car production and how, to this day, it contributes to the

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Accordingly to Lomnitz, “dependency theory did not describe the nature of exchanges throughout Latin American history very accurately, since it represented dependency as a continuous thread, from colonial to republican eras into the present, rather than a relatively recent development” (2012:354; see also Roseberry 1986 Chapter Six for a critique of ‘dependency theory’ and ‘world-system theory’). While I agree with his point, my decision to place them together is to emphasize the long histories of an Atlantic relationship and endurance of power relations shaping and constituting places such as Latin America. This assertion, however, doesn’t imply that power relations are static; they are always in the making, disrupted and reconfigured.
reproduction of a celebratory narrative about Volkswagen de México. This dissertation, then, is not an ethnography of the factory itself but rather an ethnography of the various ways in which a transnational corporation becomes embedded in a place.

By focusing on how people are drawn into the car economy, I delve into subject formation. Since the onset of car production in Mexico, multinational car assembly and, later, transnational car manufacturing have been praised for their ability to create a modern subject that embodies a certain set of values. The attempt to shape subjectivities is not confined to Mexico. The classical example of this crafting is how, while producing Ford Motor Ts, Henry Ford was also shaping ‘American citizens’ out of an immigrant labor force by cultivating “American values” (Grandin 2010; Meyer 1981). Volkswagen car production has a similar genealogy. When Adolf Hitler imagined the Volkswagen Beetle (at the time called KdF-Wagen), he imagined it as manufactured by working class Germans for consumption by those same factory workers, their families, and anyone who would fit into his ideal racially homogenous society, the German Volk (Rieger 2013). The German Volk, however, is not a given; Hitler actively cultivated the “values” of the Volk.

In Mexico in the 1960s, General Motors executives saw themselves as bringing “the fruits of industrial ‘progress’ to Mexico” (Bachelor 2001:276). This project was part of a larger scheme by U.S. automakers that resembled the “Americanization” of foreign-born factory workers (ibid). In the Mexican context, it aimed to mold “Mexican workers into a class of efficient, well-paid, and reliable mass-production workers [and to] bring prosperity to the economically disadvantaged country” (ibid). However, the U.S. project of shaping Mexican industrial capitalist workers has a much longer history. Even before the first Ford assemblage factory opened in Mexico in the 1920s, “Henry Ford bragged to [Mexican] government leaders that his enterprise would help calm the country’s revolutionary waters and reduce rebels like
Pancho Villa to mere ‘timekeepers’ for industrial capitalism” (Norton Leonard 1932, cited in Bachelor 2001:276; see also Grandin 2010).

The desire to shape a particular subject, however, cannot be seen as a kind of missionary effort carried out by the apostles of economic liberalism (Moreno 2003) nor as merely the attempt to craft an industrial worker. In Mexico, industrial production, labor specialization, the discipline of the workplace, and learning how to use industrial machines were considered practices crucial to crafting an industrial worker and to cultivating a sense of individuality. Manuel Gamio, considered the father of “Mexican Anthropology” and a key figure involved in delineating policies that were deeply entwined with the processes of nation state formation, praised industrial labor for its role in creating ‘modern Mexico.’ In the 1920s and 1930s, he developed programs and policies, implemented by the state, to create the ‘mestizo nation,’ a nation of culturally assimilated Indians who would speak Spanish, know ‘science,’ live in cities, and work with machines. 7 He wanted to create ‘individuals’ suspended from social and economic relations such as working together in communal lands or exchanging forms of labor, practices he took to be inferior, primitive, and damaging (Gamio 1935:115). 8 Gamio’s assimilation project tapped into and drawn from European and U.S. ideas about race and evolution (Walsh 2004) which have also been prevalent in Mexico since the 19th century (ibid; Golte 1980).

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7 Gamio also implemented policies and programs to re-settle Mexican migrants returning from the United States (Walsh 2008). On the racial ideology shaping Manuel Gamio’s projects and more broadly on the racial underpinnings of development, see Walsh (2004).

8 The project of mestizaje is more than just a project of transformation and subject formation. It is also a racial project and ideology that simultaneously continues to deny the existence of racism in Mexico by constructing it as a “raceless” place (Moreno Figuero and Saldivar Tanaka (2016). In Chapter One and Three, I dwell on the racial underpinnings of mestizo and on racism in Mexico.
Within his proposals of linguistic unification, cultural fusion, and the crafting of a homogenous country, the consumption of technological and mechanical artifacts played a significant role. This consumption, Gamio argued, would create consumers which in turn would help the national industry and it would, along with industrial production, help transform Mexico into a modern nation-state (Gamio 1935:111). But more significant, industrial work and discipline together with consumption of technological artifacts such as watches and cars would create the modern Mexican *mestizo* subject. *Mestizaje* is a national and racial ideology that has shaped 20th century Mexico and that has blurred systemic and socially embedded racism and discrimination (Lomnitz 2010; Moreno Figueroa and Saldivar Tanaka 2016; Saldivar 2014). Thus car manufacturing in Mexico is not only the birth of modern standardized industrial capitalism. It must also be understood within the longstanding state project of assimilating the indigenous population through ‘development’ (and the related idea that indigenous people hold back ‘development’) (Gamio 1935; Walsh 2004). Car manufacturing partakes in the making of Mexico as a *mestizo* nation by way of creating subjects manufacturing and consuming a mass standardized commodity. At the same time, as I will show, car manufacturing partakes in the long histories of racialized dispossessions intrinsic to nation-state formation.

**Car Manufacturing in Pre-NAFTA Mexico**

Car production is a labor and capital-intensive enterprise. Since the 1950s, car manufacturing has been the preferred path of ‘development’ and ‘progress’ in Mexico. Yet, even though car production has been embedded in national projects of development and described using a nationalist register, it has also been entangled with multinational corporations (Wolfe 2010). Like in Venezuela, the creation of the “Mexican automotive industry” has been the stage for the
“theater of modernization: the ensemble of laws, practices, and rituals of rule through which the political and the economic elite reproduce its power by defining the terms of national development” (Coronil 1997:238–239).

In this and the following section, I delve into the interventionist policies that have shaped “the Mexican automotive industry” and the mechanisms put into place to carry out the seemingly smooth process of global car production. To do this, I divide this account into two key moments – the pre- and post-NAFTA period – to show the ways in which the entwinement between state and transnational corporations has been reproduced and reconfigured over the years.

Car manufacturing in Mexico began after Mexican president Adolfo López Mateos (1958-1964) decreed in 1962 that 60% of each car sold in Mexico must be manufactured in the country. Following this decree, seven multinationals – Ford, General Motors, Volkswagen, Chrysler, Nissan, Renault, and American Motors – built factories to manufacture cars for Mexico and for Central America (Bennett and Sharpe 1985).9

Four years earlier, in 1958, when López Mateos first became president of Mexico, one of the main goals of his economic policy was to create an automobile manufacturing industry.10

After considerable research by NAFIN, the state industrial development bank, and many visits to

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9 Eighteen companies were established initially but only seven stayed in Mexico. While car manufacturing took off after the 1962 decree, car assemblage in Mexico has a much longer history. Ford arrived in 1925, and General Motors in 1937. At this time, their cars arrived from Detroit as “completely knocked down” (CKD) kits to be assembled in Mexico. European cars, by contrast, arrived completely assembled. By 1958, ten Mexican-owned car assemblies, such as Fabricas Auto-Mex, assembled vehicles under the license of Chrysler. Other assemblies were Willys Mexicana which assembled Jeeps, Datsuns, Austins, and Peugeots for other Mexican importers and distributors. The Mexican government owned Diesel Nacional which, under the license of Fiat, assembled cars and trucks. Toward the end of the 1950s, the Mexican government prohibited the importation of assembled cars. From then on, cars could only be imported as CKD kits. At the end of this decade, Chrysler, Ford, and GM – the Big Three – dominated the Mexican market, but smaller European vehicles began to be imported and assembled as well. The Mexican government supported the entry of these smaller and cheaper automobiles as a way to challenge U.S. industries (Bennett and Sharpe 1985). For a historical account on how car industries throughout Latin America developed see Jenkins (1977).

10 The following account is mostly drawn from Bennett and Sharpe (1985).
Brazil and Argentina – which already hosted a manufacturing automotive industry – a detailed report was presented to the Mexican government as the first step toward a new policy for the car industry: to dissolve smaller assembly firms and substitute them with a manufacturing industry. This transformation was expected to provide a broader economic stimulus by creating a demand for raw materials as well as for auto-parts completely manufactured in Mexico. In the U.S., car industries became a major source of industrialization because car manufacturing is connected to other industries such as iron, steel, rubber, plastic, and glass, and because car production is connected to a network of distribution and servicing. Once cars are in circulation, they lead to the growth of petrol stations and of the oil industry. Copying this model of industrialization, Latin American governments in the 50’s and 60’s assigned the motor industry a special place in their development strategies for industrialization (Jenkins 1987).

Among the recommendations that NAFIN presented were the following: a) only four or five firms should be allowed to manufacture cars in Mexico, b) each auto-producer could only manufacture one model with a few extras; luxury vehicles were forbidden and the emphasis in manufacturing would be on compact cars, and c) auto-producers would be limited to the machining and assembly of the engine and vehicle. The auto-parts were to be supplied by independent producers based in Mexico. The goals of this policy included job creation, investments, foreign-exchange-savings, and the increase of technical competence. These recommendations, along with the policies of import substitution industrialization (ISI), served as a basis for the 1962 presidential decree. Its rationale was that the automobile industry was an

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11 Measures such as these were not uncontested: for example, Ford and GM fought them because it would mean that these companies could not import pieces from their factories in Detroit.
engine of industrial growth and would pull the rest of the economy with it into a phase of self-sustained growth.

This process created different industries working around the automobile industry, such as steel, glass, and petrol. But car manufacturing also intersects with processes of urbanization and of capitalist accumulation that have been integral to Mexico’s development visions. Although since 1962 car manufacturing has been carried out by multinational corporations, which later became transnational, and some of the industries supporting car manufacturing were Mexican-owned (e.g., HYLSA, a steel producer), others were mixed capital (Mexican and foreign), and still others were multinationals (Federal Mogul, an auto-part supplier), car production has been described by various government administrations as an inherently Mexican industry.

After the 1962 decree, several amendments were made to shape car production and the production of auto-parts (Bueno 1998). Amendments responded to the socio-economic and political developments in the country as well as global transformations. For example, at the same time that maquiladora production took off along the U.S.-Mexico border as part of an economic shift and the transformation of Mexico’s vision of development from ISI (import substitution industrialization) to EOI (export oriented industrialization), the government made the exportation of auto-parts produced in Mexico an imperative and required auto-manufacturers to export their cars to balance out the remaining importation of auto-parts. In 1977, in the middle of a growing economic crisis, the emphasis was shifted again to import substitution. The state then required a higher local content, and by 1981, 80% became mandatory.

These transformations unfolded in the context of a major global restructuring in the auto-industry. Ford, GM, Chrysler, and Volkswagen built or expanded their facilities to increase exports to the United States. In 1983, immediately following Mexico’s 1982 economic crisis, a decree required car manufacturers to produce ‘austere’ cars because these would be cheaper in
the Mexican market and would not need expensive imported parts. Although the government required auto-industries to export a portion of these cars, due to their ‘austerity,’ they were hard to sell on the international market. In 1986, Mexico became a GATT (General Agreement of Tariffs and Trades) member and began to liberalize its trade policy. The Mexican government shifted its approach to growth by increasing “reliance on market mechanisms and on macro-economic policies to direct the evolution of the micro-economic structure and develop an export-oriented manufacturing sector” (Morris 1998; Ruiz Durán 1997; Tuman and Morris 1998). While flexible labor (non-unionized workers) has been intrinsic to car manufacturing, with the shift to EOI this trend increased (Middlebrook 1991).

In 1989, even though the model of EOI was already in place, a decree ended the protectionism that had previously marked ISI. Under NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement signed in 1994, this decree was amended, and the importation of assembled cars and auto-parts was approved. At the end of the 80’s but especially under NAFTA, auto-industries became the principal beneficiary of trade liberation – not only because of the easy access to U.S. and Canadian markets but also because NAFTA has weakened labor unions and labor rights, created wage restraints, reduced benefits, and implemented other policies designed to reduce costs and boost productivity.

The shift to EOI happened in conjuncture with the austerity measures imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) following Mexico’s debt crisis in the 1980s. Throughout this decade, Mexico cut state subsidies, privatized state enterprises, education and health, and

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12 GATT (1949-1993) preceded the WTO. It was a set of rules for traded goods. One of the differences between GATT and WTO is that the latter is an institutional body which includes the service sector and intellectual property rights.

13 For an account of the processes that led to the 1980’s debt crisis, see Gledhill (2007) and Weaver (2012)
dismantling Mexico’s welfare state. These processes were carried out more aggressively under the presidency of Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988 – 1994). NAFTA, which was the “centerpiece” (Gledhill 2007:237) of the Salinista government, unfolded within this austerity context whose effects and consequences continue to be lived until today. Importantly, these processes were also reconfigured by NAFTA which engendered “a noveau riche class” while also increasing poverty. NAFTA has brought many transnational corporations to Mexico to manufacture cars and auto-parts which has increased well-paid jobs for a large number of Mexican professionals with a college degree. Yet, for those who actually manufacture commodities, it has meant low pay jobs where people earn only the minimum wage of $ 3.94 per day (80.04 pesos). Of the 34 countries that belong to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Mexico has the most extreme income inequality (Molloy 2016: 160).

Car Manufacturing in Post- NAFTA Mexico

Anthropological literature on corporations has examined corporate sovereignty and impunity as well as the reconceptualization of the ‘corporation as a natural person’ and how this concept is re-deployed to disrupt corporate sovereignty (Sawyer 2006), how a corporation is enacted and its often contradictory dimensions (Welker 2014; 2016), and how corporations, through the practice of Corporate Social Responsibility, have become key players in ‘development,’ (Rajak 2011) along with the production of ‘corporate personhood’ (Gershon 2014). This dissertation shifts the gaze. It draws attention to another dimension that over the past twenty years has given power to transnational corporations: free trade agreements.

According to the director of the World Trade Organization, free trade agreements are like “writing the constitution of a single global economy” (cited in Healy 2008:137 ft. 14). As part of
this re-writing, NAFTA was the first trade agreement “to establish the ‘investor-state’ clause which for the first time permitted an investor to sue a state” (ibid; see also Alvarez 2016; Frens-String and Velasco 2016). As NAFTA posits, “since 1994 corporations have been permitted to take governments to court for having ‘breached their obligations’ under the agreement and causing damages to the investor as a result” (North American Free Trade Agreement 1992, Art. 1116 and 1117, cited in Healy 2008: 136). ‘Breaching obligations’ could mean passing a new environmental law that is interpreted as disrupting corporations’ operations. Today, a large number of countries are sued by corporations, including Mexico, Canada, the United States, Ghana, Ukraine, Germany, El Salvador, Ecuador, and Argentina.14 As this list suggests, no country is exempt from the power that free trade agreements have granted to corporations. Free trade agreements, Noam Chomsky argues, are in fact “investors rights agreements” (2015). In this dissertation, I pay attention to NAFTA and its multiplicity of effects on the ground. As such, this dissertation is an attempt to bring into the study of corporations an examination of free trade agreements.

Since the implementation of NAFTA, other car industries have moved to Mexico. There are now 34 car assemblers, such as Porsche, Honda, Mazda and Mercedes Benz, that assemble cars not only for the domestic, U.S., and Canadian markets but also for a large number of countries outside of North America. Mexico is party to twelve free-trade agreements with 44 countries in the Americas, Europe, Asia, and the Middle East (Molloy 2016). NAFTA and the shift to “lean-production” in car manufacturing have outsourced production from the larger manufacturers to a network of maquiladoras that supply the car factories. Most of these

14 State-investor arbitration was created in Germany in the 1950s. But since Germany has now also been sued by corporations, it is now lobbying for removing that clause (Provost and Kennard 2015).
*maquiladoras* are not located on the Mexico-U.S. border, but are rather in close proximity to car factories that are clustered in industrial parks to facilitate “just-in-time” production and delivery, which is part of the “lean-production” model.\(^\text{15}\) This model of production is characterized by the manufacture of auto-parts as they are required and speedily delivered in order to avoid large inventories. In the present day, *maquiladoras* are the most common source of formal employment in Mexico.

Though in the past car manufacturing was shaped by the Mexican government’s interventionist policies, today it is shaped by NAFTA. This free trade agreement has transformed Mexico into a hub for the production and exportation of agricultural and manufactured commodities. NAFTA also marked the end of the government’s role in shaping car production and the production of auto-parts. It prohibited governmental decrees as well as the nationalization of resources and companies or any action threatening corporations (Healy 2008:136). Beyond ending the role of the government, NAFTA reconfigured the state’s role. Now, the role of the government is to court car companies through its centralized agency, ProMexico, to promote international trade and investments (Piecyk, Mordue and Yates 2016).\(^\text{16}\) According to the Automotive Policy Research Centre, the number of cars manufactured in Mexico per year increased from 1.2 million in 2007 to 3.4 million in 2015, with a forecast of more than 5 million cars per year by 2020 (ibid: 2).\(^\text{17}\)

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\(^\text{15}\) Industrial parks are publicly and privately owned (Piecyk, Mordue, and Yates 2016:8).

\(^\text{16}\) ProMexico’s activities focus primarily on agriculture and automotive manufacturing. It was founded in 2007.

\(^\text{17}\) This research center is based in Canada at McMaster University. The aim of this report was to suggest policies to the Canadian government to increase car production in Canada; while car manufacturing has increased in Mexico, Canada has not built new assembly lines since 2008. ProMexico has gained the attention of the Canadian and the U.S. governments (Piecyk, Mordue and Yates 2016).
Today, NAFTA is celebrated for having inserted Mexico into the global economy, yet this insertion has come at a heavy cost. NAFTA—and the rise of ProMexico—"coincide with declining real wages in Mexico despite rising skill and education levels of the workforce; a trend that distinguishes Mexico from countries such as China" (ibid: 3). Although prior to NAFTA labor conditions and possibilities were not stable either, NAFTA has contributed to cheapening labor as well as increased labor precarity and uncertainty in Mexico.

As Patricia Fernández Kelly and Douglass Massey explain, NAFTA has also forced peasants to migrate because there are no more subsidies for subsistence agriculture (2007: 116). NAFTA has displaced two million Mexican farmers (Saldaña-Portillo 2016). But in many places in Mexico, this displacement is also due to the aggressive push for car manufacturing. Agricultural lands, many of which were ejido, are now used to build factories. On the other hand, NAFTA has created more than half a million low paying jobs in maquiladoras. Today many people cannot find a job and if they find one, they cannot live with the wages paid in maquiladoras. According to the Bank of Mexico, the purchasing power of a Mexican worker’s wage has declined by 73% since 1976 (Molloy 2016: 160).18

In the car manufacturing sector, uncertainty and low wages—in fact the lowest wages within the context of global car manufacturing (Covarrubias Valdenebro 2014) – are assumed by the United Auto Workers leadership (UAW) to be the result of “the lack of independence between unions and management” (Barkholz 2011, cited in Piecyk, Mordue and Yates 2016:8).

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18 Those earning the minimum wage or at times even less—about 44 million people (40% of the population)—are in the middle and therefore are considered to be part of the “middle class” by the Mexican statistical agency, INEGI. Above them on the social ladder are the richest 10% Mexicans, and below them are the 46.2% living in poverty, some in extreme conditions (Molloy 2016: 160).
Yet, there is more to it than that. Uncertain labor conditions and low wages are the structural conditions shaping the global political economy of car manufacturing.

In Mexico wages are kept artificially low (Shaiken 1995), and NAFTA has not only meant free trade but also the reconfiguration of the social contract between workers, state, and corporations. Significantly, this reconfiguration is in tandem with the rise of the neoliberal state in Mexico. NAFTA curtailed workers’ political power. As the ex-director on labor law research at the NAFTA Commission for Labor Cooperation, Lance Compa argues, key labor rights, such as “freedom of association, the right to engage in political action, the right to organize and bargain collectively, and the right to strike, are excluded from anything more than ‘consultation’” (1994:104–105). Furthermore, NAFTA increased the number of workers that are not unionized which has deepened social fragmentation within the workforce. It has instilled competition between workers, motivated by the hope of making it into the ranks of the unionized labor force.

In the post-NAFTA era, the Mexican government continues to assure an unlimited supply of labor for the assembly lines. But it also now assures a high-tech skilled labor force. Governments from different Mexican states (such as Puebla and Guanajuato) are investing in creating a new high tech workforce as a way to attract more investments, to make the middle class grow, and to better situate Mexico in the global chain of car production. As I will show in this dissertation, those belonging to this high tech workforce as well as a number of Mexicans with college degrees are brought into global capitalism in ways very different from those who are laboring at maquiladoras, those displaced from their lands, those who migrated to the U.S. or have become temporary workers in Canada or those who have the cultural capital to work for a transnational corporations but can’t find a job. For college graduates and a high tech workforce, NAFTA and transnational corporations have opened up global connections and possibilities.
Their positionality within global capitalism and Mexico’s socio-economic processes is not only related to class. It is also shaped by race. More than 40% of the indigenous population live in extreme poverty compared to 10% of the non-indigenous population; an indigenous person with a college degree earns 30% less than her or his non-indigenous counterpart; and a person with lighter skin tends to have between two and three more years of schooling (Moreno Figueroa and Saldívar Tanaka 2016: 516). In Mexico, class and race intersect and mutually constitute each other in defining the terms of inclusion in processes of capitalist development and nation-state formation.

While the Mexican government continues to provide incentives to attract car industries, these have also been reconfigured. In the past, it offered tax exemptions and discounts on land it made available for purchase. Today, the government continues to offer tax exemptions as well as large incentives from both the federal government and the state (Piecyk, Mordue and Yates 2016: 11). For example, the incentives that the state of Guanajuato has given to foreign companies amounts to about four billion pesos, and the state of Puebla provided Audi –which is part of the Volkswagen Consortium – approximately US$100 million to build its first factory in Latin America (ibid). Other incentives included infrastructure in the form of industrial parks, access to airports, railroads, ports and highways, and services such as sewage, telephones, streets, and electricity. Transnational car factories, as I will show in Chapter Two, also received subsidies from the government for not firing the non-unionized workforce.

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19 Toyota, Mazda, Honda, Volkswagen, and Pirelli have also benefited from these incentives. Kia Motors received 20 years of tax exemptions, in the amount of US$ 100 million, infrastructure, and the construction of the factory, and even the government of Nuevo León, Monterrey offered to pay for the factory’s inauguration party (Flores 2015, cited in Piecyk, Mordue and Yates 2016: 13).
The push to transform Mexico into a global automotive producer includes incentive packages to attract corporations, and a very important incentive is land. For example, the government of Nuevo Leon, Monterrey offered 533 hectares of land to Kia Motors. Whether it was provided directly by the government or the transaction was merely brokered by the government, the free or cheap land supplied to build car factories and the industrial parks that support car manufacturing has transformed agricultural lands into a raw material to support the car economy.

In Mexico, land, especially in the form of *ejido*, is symbolic of peasant struggles and histories of an agrarian reform that aimed to include landless peasants and peons (unskilled farm workers often held in servitude by a creditor) in Mexico’s project of nation-state formation. In 1992, *ejido* lost its valence when the venue to transform it into private property was created. After NAFTA, Mexico began an aggressive push for car production which meant the dispossession of *ejido* and *minifundio* land to build factories. Land and water dispossession are part of the predatory practices sustaining Mexico’s global car economy.

Under the rationale of “jobs” and “economic growth,” the car economy has created a class of landless peasants, a high-tech skilled force, and a working class. In the post-NAFTA era, it has also enabled the creation of new forms of solidarity across borders and ways of being political. I trace this unexpected side of the car economy by examining how the predatory practices sustaining the car economy have also enabled the formation of an “ecological politics” that not only contests car production but also highlights the paradox of exchanging land for ‘jobs.’ The flipside of the destruction, dispossession, and histories of violence that constitute car

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20 See Chapter One, Two and Three for the terms of this inclusion.  
21 See Chapter Four and Five on the terms of the inclusion through jobs and on labor conditions.
manufacturing is the mobilization of people and the creation of alternative political and social imaginaries.

Car production in Mexico, despite its differences in the pre-NAFTA era and the post-NAFTA era, has been deeply entrenched in processes of nation-state formation. Therefore, transnational car production in Mexico is a window to examine what anthropologist Fernando Coronil describes, in his critique of James Scott’s *Seeing Like a State*, as

the mutual historical constitution of ‘state’ and ‘market,’ their close interaction, and their ongoing transformation. The modes of objectification, homogenization, and abstraction that Scott attributes to the state are inseparable from conceptual, technological, and social transformations linked not just to the constitution of modern state bureaucracies but to the development of global capitalism and the generalized commodification of social life (2001:124). \(^{22}\)

In this dissertation, I elucidate this mutual constitution from a wide range of vantage points at different moments in time using *Volkswagen de México* as a lens. I examine how this constitution has been created across scales as well as the forms and meanings it has taken. In doing so, I illuminate the entwinements between, and as Coronil argues, the mutual constitution of transnational corporations and the nation-state. But I also bring to light the supranational

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\(^{22}\) According to Coronil, “the opposition between state and market that structures [Scott’s book is a] thin simplification” (2001:124).
dimension of free trade agreements and the ways in which they shape the relationship between corporation and state.

Volkswagen de México

Similar to other corporations around the world, the impact of Volkswagen in Puebla goes beyond the production of commodities. For more than fifty years, the factory has been part of the city through donations to restore the downtown area and through charity programs (see also Welker 2014; Rajak 2011). Volkswagen also has a bank, the Volkswagen Bank, which embeds the corporation in productive and financial capitalism in a variety of ways.

In line with a long history of ‘transformative’ projects shaping capitalist processes of nation-state formation, Volkswagen de México today is widely praised for transforming “culture” and shaping the “the Mexican of the 21st century.” In the past fifteen years, Volkswagen has opened three language schools in Puebla (Centro de Idiomas Volkswagen). Employees and workers receive a discount but the centers are open to anyone. The languages taught in these schools are indicative of the skills and the embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu 1985) that are required to succeed (or at least attempt to succeed) in the global economy: German, Spanish, British English, French and Mandarin. As part of this crafting, Volkswagen has also opened a trilingual high school. Teachers are specialized (they have college degree in Geography or Political Science, for instance) and at least bilingual. A number of teachers are Mexicans who studied in Mexico’s private universities (UDLAP, UIA, ITESM). At the Volkswagen high

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23 Suggesting that transnational corporations are entwined with processes of nation-state formation and are embedded in a place resonates with anthropologist Marina Welker’s suggestion that “corporations are […] embedded institutions, located in national and regional geographic and historical conjunctures that they can shape, but rarely control” (2016:420). Her aim, however, is to show how corporations are an open and unstable phenomena rather than only institutions seeking to maximize profit (ibid:398-409).
school, three majors (Licenciatura) are offered: Asistente Gerencial Trilingüe (Trilingual Management Assistant), Licenciado en Enseñanza de Lenguas y Estudios Interculturales (Languages and Intercultural Studies Teacher) and Licenciatura en Gestión Corporativa (Corporate Management).

The names and descriptions of each of these majors indicate the ways in which Volkswagen in Mexico is part of a global corporate trend where students are conceptualized as “bundles of skills” (Urcioili 2008), particularly communication skills –which in the case of Volkswagen’s language school means not only linguistic competence but also the ability to speak at least three languages. This cultural capital is complemented with courses in human relations. As linguistic anthropologist Bonnie Urcioili notes, the skills that are taught here are understood as facets of personhood with exchange value on the labor market (2008). It is important to note that this possibility of crafting oneself to belong to the ‘glamorous’ side of global capitalism (i.e., to not be the Mexican “expelled from the future” (Bartra 1987:176)) is open only to the Mexican elite: Volkswagen’s high school and college education are among the most expensive in Puebla.

The project of crafting also unfolds at the factory grounds. White-collar workers – professionals with a college degree – working for Volkswagen de México actively craft themselves to embody what they call “the German work culture” characterized by efficiency, order, clarity, and a strict division between working time and leisure time, such as always having free time (Feierabend) after a day of work. Such self-crafting, however, begins prior to getting a job at the factory. My interlocutors opt for college degrees in disciplines, which they think, will make them more hirable at Volkswagen, such as Engineering, Business Management, Accounting, or Marketing. They complement these college degrees with learning English and German. Languages and certain college degrees are seen as ‘assets.’ In some cases, those
aspiring to become part of Volkswagen even travel to Germany to polish their language skills. As anthropologist Ilana Gershon argues, “under neoliberal capitalism, one owns oneself as though one is a […] collections of skills [and] assets” (Gershon 2014:288; see also Urciuoli 2008). Along these lines, I elucidate the formation of subjects as well as processes of commodification connected to Volkswagen de México.

Just as, ironically, Mexican subjects are shaped by borrowing elements from “German culture,” the German corporation has become the ground for a recrafting of “Mexico.” Volkswagen de México has long been an integral part of Mexico’s national imaginary. For example in 2000, at the World Fair in Hannover, Volkswagen de México represented the “Mexican Industry” in Mexico’s pavilion. In 2010, to commemorate Mexico’s Bicentenary of its Independence and the Centenary of its Revolution, Volkswagen manufactured the Bicentenary Car. When this symbolic gift—a brown Jetta with the year 2010 imprinted on its right door—was presented to the then Mexican president Felipe Calderón, the car was described as a “special contribution” to the national celebrations. At that time, many in Mexico saw the production of the Bicentenary Car as a marketing strategy and thus suspected Volkswagen de México of not being ‘truly’ invested in the national celebrations. Nevertheless the car quickly sold out. But more importantly, the event where this car was presented came with all the fanfare and performativity of a state spectacle. Besides the Mexican president and Volkswagen president Otto Lindner, Puebla’s governor and major, the ambassadors of Germany and Austria, as well as other political figures and journalists attended the event. Shaking hands on a stage, Mexican president Felipe Calderón and Volkswagen president Otto Linder renewed the bonds that signify the intertwinements between the transnational corporation and Mexico.
Methodology and Positionality

I was born and grew up in Puebla, and Beetles were an integral part of my childhood and youth. I had friends whose parents worked for Volkswagen de México and who later in college themselves aspired to work for the factory. Yet, I have not lived in Puebla for almost twenty years. First I moved to New York City where I worked, did my B.A., and started my graduate education; then I moved to Toronto to complete my Ph.D. The spatial and temporal distance in combination with my academic training have given me a critical distance to Puebla that co-exists with a sense of familiarity. During my fieldwork, I drove a 1982 Beetle, which was not only useful for getting around a metropolis such as Puebla and attending events in other locations, such as the International Beetle Day in Mexico City, but also gave me unique access to Beetle car clubs.

To ethnographically examine the presence of Volkswagen in Mexico, I carried out fieldwork with Volkswagen workers and employees, people who aspire to work for the factory, engineering students sponsored by the factory, members of Beetle car clubs, and peasants contesting land and water dispossession. Through conversations with a large number of people in different social settings, I learned about how they relate to the factory. My interlocutors come from a wide range of social backgrounds and from different generations. Many hold a college degree from Puebla’s public university or from a private university while others are not employed formally or have only completed their high school education. Most of my interlocutors come from working class backgrounds; they are either workers at the factory, unemployed or workers from other companies, or peasants. In addition, I also did fieldwork with many young professionals who have benefited from the presence of Volkswagen de México.
One of the ways in which this dissertation is trying to capture the heterogeneous social composition connected to *Volkswagen de México* is by talking about *collectivities*. In the following chapters, the reader will encounter different collectivities that are connected, created, disrupted or destroyed by not only the car economy but also by Mexico’s ongoing project of making car manufacturing the hegemonic economic and productive model. While within themselves, these collectivities are also heterogeneous (in terms of age, gender, and social occupation), by using ‘collectivities,’ I aim at highlighting the different ways in which my interlocutors relate to or are connected to the factory, not merely as individuals but also as members of particular social classes and formations. During fieldwork, moving between these heterogeneous groups of people was at times draining. For example, after spending the morning listening to Volkswagen workers’ grievances or reading about land expropriation to expand the factory, it was difficult to then listen to members of Beetle car clubs bemoaning how “la *Volkswagen* affected all us when it stopped the manufacturing of the Beetle.” Car club members and those in the higher wage ranks at Volkswagen often read any grievances against the factory as a personal attack. By using the framework of ‘collectivities,’ I aim at highlighting the social differences and distances that I encountered during fieldwork and that are part and parcel of the social composition of Mexico in the past and today.

Besides participant observation and interviews, I also draw on local media representations. I examined local newspapers from 1960 to 2016 as well as other media representations, such as a radio show celebrating the presence of the factory. For an examination of newspapers prior to 1990, I went to the *Centro Cultural Poblano* where Puebla’s newspaper archives are located. Perusing newspapers, I paid attention to how *Volkswagen de México* has been talked about and how it is represented in the Mexican media, especially media that is tied to the government. Through this research, I found that, even before the factory came to Puebla, the
government, the entrepreneurial class and many within Puebla’s bourgeoisie had argued for the necessity of car assembling in Puebla. The widely resounding promise was that car production would modernize industrial production and that the manufacturing of cars in Mexico would make cars accessible to many people. Transforming the industrial landscape - from textile production to car production - brought into conflict two factions of Puebla’s bourgeoisie: textile industrialists who were attacked for manufacturing with machinery from the early 20th century with a small labor force and not even paying minimum wages, and parts of the government interested in ‘modernizing’ production by standardizing mass production and creating a large labor force, who also were motivated by extending their economic and political power.

It is in these local newspapers that I found the decrees that expropriated land to either expand the Volkswagen factory or to build an industrial park for Volkswagen’s suppliers. By paying attention to these decrees, I trace the arguments and logics put forth for the expropriation of ejido and minifundio. Expropriation decrees broaden the scope of the presence of transnational corporations in Mexico. Rather than just telling a story of flows of capital arriving into the country, I focus on the ways in which Mexico’s legal mechanisms have facilitated and mediated transnational capital and how the presence of corporations intersects with national projects of development.

As part of my fieldwork, I also paid attention to events, sites and representations outside of the factory to trace the corporation’s presence in Puebla, such as Volkswagen sponsoring running events or charity programs, and the ways in which Volkswagen enables modes of sociality beyond the assembly lines. Events far removed from the actual car production illustrate the ways in which Volkswagen is embedded in Puebla. By drawing together these various sources, this dissertation offers an ethnographically and historically informed account of the multilayered presence of Volkswagen de México.
Outline of Chapters

In the following pages, I offer different vantage points on Volkswagen’s presence in Puebla in order to examine the entangled relationships that constitute the car economy. Drawing on fieldwork among Beetle car club members in Puebla and on events that celebrate the Beetle, Chapter One, *The Car of El Pueblo*, describes how the old Beetle has become a beloved object in Mexico. I historically situate this examination within the socio-economic and political landscape and class relations in Mexico prior to and after the arrival of Volkswagen in Mexico. In this chapter I delve into the story of how the Beetle, which in Germany was supposed to be the car of the German *Volk* – a racially homogenous working class - was in Mexico in the 1950s represented as “the car of *el pueblo*” – also a working class shaped by racial undertones, *el pueblo as mestizo*. Ethnographically, this chapter illuminates how a commodity that was endowed with the power to modernize Mexico is today an object of endearment circulating across generations. I show intimate relationships with a technological artifact as well as how the Beetle becomes a medium of inter-generational relations among working class men. The car today is also a window into how class relations work on the ground. Transformed into an object of endearment, the Beetle embodies two forms of labor: the labor power used in manufacturing to produce a commodity, and the labor needed to restore, appropriate and adapt the *vocho* so it can represent identities and circulate across generations. Appropriating the car, working class male Mexicans have reclaimed their place in a stratified society.

In Chapter Two, *Puebla is Volkswagen*, I draw on fieldwork in the wider city and with people who are not directly related to *Volkswagen de México*. I show how the factory is celebrated for being part of the life of the city, not only through jobs but also through social
events that the factory sponsors, such as marathons or donations to restore the city’s colonial heritage while simultaneously making Puebla a “modern city.” By tracing these celebratory discourses, I examine how Puebla has been produced as a space and place deeply entwined with Volkswagen. In this production, imaginaries and memories are as significant as are the ways in which Volkswagen de México is continuously celebrated and praised for “giving jobs.” Conversely, for years, Puebla has been haunted by the threat of Volkswagen leaving, a threat that has not only surfaced at times of labor unrest but also at moments when the fragility of Mexico’s global car economy –deeply tied to NAFTA– becomes the naked truth. As I illustrate, seemingly paradoxically, while ‘threat’ indicates a power relation, it at the same time reinforces the celebratory attachments and relationships to Volkswagen de México.

Simultaneously, I examine the political economy of the production of place and space. The land that became the Volkswagen factory and the infrastructure supporting the car economy fell under the category of ejido, a form of social property, and minifundio, a smallholding of land for subsistence farming. This land complemented livelihoods and was embedded in a system of social relations. What emerges from the juxtaposition of inclusions and exclusions in relation to Volkswagen’s car economy is the simultaneous constitution and destruction of collectivities, ways of being, and economies. Both of these processes are deeply intertwined with Mexico’s visions of development and processes of nation-state formation. Since the 1940s, the Mexican government has embarked on a project of intensive capitalist accumulation (Joseph et al. 2001:8); aggressive industrialization and large-scale agricultural production were prioritized over small-scale peasant economies. With large-scale car manufacturing, industrialization and capitalist accumulation accelerated. By delving into the popular slogan “Puebla is Volkswagen,”

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24 Prior the Mexican Revolution, there was also an intense form of capitalist accumulation.
I focus on the articulation of flows of capital, Mexico’s project of industrialization, regional development plans, and personalistic authoritarian rule—all mediated by Mexico’s legal apparatus—in the production of Puebla as an epicenter of global car manufacturing.

In addition to land dispossession, car manufacturing has also caused water dispossession. In **Chapter Three, Traces of Car Manufacturing**, I turn to a group of peasant-activists who evoke land and water disposessions not to oppose car manufacturing, but rather to oppose the state-led and transnational infrastructural projects that continue transforming Puebla into a metropolis with a large industrial concentration. As part of this transformation, land and water are transformed into fictitious commodities that are transferred to industries while simultaneously abstracting them from the social and vital roles they play in livelihoods. Histories of dispossession and trails of destruction are today the traces of car manufacturing and have created a form of heteroglossic ecological politics. Besides being a political instrument, traces also shed light on an obscured and violent history of the presence of Volkswagen in Mexico, and they illuminate the conditions of possibility for today’s car economy in Puebla: degradation, torture, and subjugation. The forms of violence that peasants were subjected to in order to dispossess them of their land are reminders that in Mexico processes of primitive accumulation, nation-state formation, and the presence of transnational corporations are deeply entwined with racialized dispossession.

Activists evoke histories of dispossession and trails of destruction to construct and contrast two value systems: one of collaboration and connection to the land associated with peasantry, and one of fragmentation and destruction associated with industrial capitalism. While this construction idealizes ‘a peasant past,’ it at the same time defamiliarizes the car economy and offers a critique of this predatory model. Chapter Two and Chapter Three combined,
moreover, describe “place” in the classic anthropological sense while also offering a glimpse of what factory towns look like in the age of global capitalism.

Today, Volkswagen de México is celebrated as giving jobs and its presence in Puebla has created an industrial monoculture. While in the past the arrival of the factory tapped into peoples’ aspirations, today the factory engenders aspirations. These aspirations vitalize not only the presence of the factory but also of capitalism more broadly through “a visceral register” (Connolly 1999). Similar to ‘public reason,’ as political theorist William E. Connolly argues, capitalism depends on “culturally formed moods, affects, and situations” (ibid: 27). Affects and vicerality are instrumental for any exploitative and conservative projects (Berlant 2011; Stewart 2007). Drawing on fieldwork with Volkswagen employees and people who aspire to work for Volkswagen de México, Chapter Four, The Volkswagen Family, elucidates how people in Puebla shape themselves to get jobs at Volkswagen de México and to become part of “the Volkswagen family.” Those who are already working at the factory continue crafting themselves to align with and embody a “German work culture.” Through the use of the family trope, the factory exhorts those who already work there to see themselves as part of a corporate family. Yet, the trope is not only asserted by the factory. Employees also use it to articulate a labor relation. Belonging to “the Volkswagen family” is constituted by two co-existing and intertwined rationales: the utilitarian rationale of shaping oneself into a more efficient worker as a way to embody “the German culture” along with the rationale (or expectation) that Volkswagen shows its ‘care for’ and ‘nurture’s’ its labor force. While ‘care’ is central to practices of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), it is also key to shaping a sense of belonging. By tracing these processes, this dissertation also contributes to an anthropology of corporate social responsibility (Dolan and Rajak 2016; Rajak 2011).
While examining the social life of the family trope and its power to articulate labor relations, in this chapter I also begin to explore the labor transformations created by the conjuncture of NAFTA and “lean production.” The more uncertain labor conditions become on the assembly lines, the more a fictive kinship relationship is emphasized. Examining how the factory brings people into the car economy, what the factory means in peoples’ lives, and how people relate to the factory aims to illuminate processes of accommodation entangled with relations of domination and subjugation within the car economy and global capitalism.

The conjuncture of “lean-production” and NAFTA-related transformations has not only made labor conditions more uncertain and curtailed workers’ political power but it has also fueled the antagonism among workers. Unionized and non-unionized workers are pitted against each other, every day, for twenty-four hours seven days a week. This antagonism is the result of uncertain labor conditions, wage ranks, calls for ‘productivity,’ and the fear of losing one’s job, and it shapes the social relations among the workforce. Yet, as I show in Chapter Five, Crafting Solidarities, while car manufacturing is shaped by relations of exploitation, subjugation, and domination, it has simultaneously engendered new ways of imagining and crafting solidarity on the assembly lines, forms of solidarity that circumvent the union. Drawing on fieldwork Volkswagen unionized workers, I show how, although workers are struggling against the conditions of labor created by this conjuncture, their struggle is not directly against Volkswagen de México. Rather, they are resisting “la clase fracturada” – the social fragmentation of the labor force. By elucidating their practices that attempt to craft solidarity, I illuminate the conditions in which workers imagine the futures of labor organizing and social relations. While some of their methods are typical union politics and build on classical understandings of ‘class struggle,’ at the same time they also draw on the bodily states experienced when manufacturing a car. They
communicate these bodily states through the poetic genre in order to viscerally engage and move workers, regardless of their categories and wage ranks.

I conclude the dissertation by revisiting in the Epilogue how the relationship among Puebla, Mexico, and Volkswagen de México continues to be reproduced in the present and for the future. Drawing on fieldwork among engineering students sponsored by Volkswagen de México, I elucidate how this future includes the crafting of a high-tech workforce and points to two interrelated visions: Volkswagen becoming the largest car manufacturer in the world, and Mexico becoming a technology producer. Significantly, while this vision aims to better situate Mexico in the global chain of car production, it also reproduces the dependency on transnational corporations and on NAFTA, along with the rationale of “cheap labor.” Yet, within this field of power relations, sponsored students craft their own future. Their desires, aspirations and visions are not contained by Volkswagen de México or by Mexico’s vision of becoming a technology producer. Thus in this final section, I show how Volkswagen’s history in Mexico is neither linear nor predictable.
Chapter 1

1 The Car of El Pueblo

A long line of Beetles is diagonally parked in front of Mexico’s National Palace, the seat of Mexico’s federal government. Although the street along the building is already packed with Beetles, many more continue to arrive while police officers direct drivers to park around Mexico City’s main square, the Zócalo. This plaza, often the site of political rallies, demonstrations, government crack-downs, national celebrations, and month-long sit-ins, is on this day, June 25, 2011, witness to a much more mundane event. Today, drivers have washed, polished, and driven their Beetles to this symbolic public square as part of a celebration called Caravana Insigne Volkswagen or the Caravan of the Famous Volkswagen. While other Volkswagen models such as Rabbits, Hippy Buses, Safaris, Golf’s, and Jetas are also present, at the heart of the celebration is the Beetle. Women, children, and men from different social strata have come together to celebrate that on this day in 1938, the first Beetle prototype was presented in Germany. Every year, the “birthday” of the vocho, as the Beetle is affectively called in Mexico, is celebrated in the Mexico’s capital.

Leading me through the rows of Beetles, Lalo, an eleven-year old boy who describes himself as the “youngest Beetle fan,” explains the features and styles that make each Beetle special. Some Beetles are modified using different styles, such as the Rat-Look style, which looks to me as though the car has been left out in the open for years. It is rusty. The interior appears to be in decay. Lalo clarifies that looks can be deceiving; it takes a lot of time and labor to create a Rat-Look Beetle. Such cars are made of recycled auto-parts from other cars or by using things not usually associated with cars, such as a hunt rifle in place of a traditional
gearshift. Other Beetles are restored to their original condition as if they had just left the assembly line.

Within the social world of Beetle fans, each Beetle is appropriated and shaped according to personal styles and economic possibilities. The only feature that remains unchangeable is the car’s oval shape, as this physical feature distinguishes the Beetle from other car models. The celebration of the Beetle in Mexico, however, is connected to more than its silhouette and the malleability that allows drivers to shape it according to their tastes. It goes beyond the fact that the car was from 1967 to 2003 manufactured on the assembly lines of Volkswagen de México. As Lalo explains to me while we stroll past the parked Beetles, “el vocho is the car of el pueblo.”

In this chapter, I explore the social life of a commodity – the Beetle – that was endowed with the power to create industrial standardized mass production in Mexico. Locally manufacturing the car aimed to increase the ranks of the proletarian labor force as well as bolster a network of industries such as steel and petroleum. But the manufacturing of the Beetle in Mexico also aimed to make a car that could be consumed by a larger majority of Mexicans, el pueblo. To this day, the Beetle continues to be a highly visible object in Mexico’s urban and rural landscapes.

In what follows, I delve into how the representation of the Beetle as “the car of el pueblo” emerged and became entangled with the idea of the working class. Doing so offers a glimpse into the socio-economic context out of which this representation emerged. I then draw on fieldwork in Beetle car clubs, particularly at Air Cooled Puebla, to elucidate how in the present day the vocho circulates in the lives of a group of working class Mexican men. I pay close attention to the socio-economic context in which the car circulates, to its connections to class positions and class mobility, but also to the Beetle’s role as a social nexus.
The *vocho* has been transformed from a mass standardized commodity into a beloved object that connects people across generations. Personal stories are entwined with how the car is appropriated by its owners—by modifying it, fixing it, restoring it and caring for it. Stories combined with these practices of appropriation constitute an intimate relationship between driver and Beetle. The transformation of the car signifies the transformation of its driver, the crafting of class-based gendered identities (Best 2006; Bright 1998; Gilroy 2001), as well as the creation of modes of relationality among men. Appropriating the Beetle has engendered forms of intimacy with and through a technological artifact. In paying attention to the social life of the Beetle, I elucidate the social relationships that this mass-produced commodity has enabled. Today, the Beetle entangles two forms of labor: workers’ labor on the assembly lines that manufacture the car, a commodified labor, and the labor that has enabled the Beetle to circulate across generations.

By exploring the social life of the *vocho*, I examine how, while car the continues to circulate in a working class milieu and is still regarded as the car of the masses, at the same time the *vocho* has been transformed into a object indexing individuality, thus disassociating the car and its driver from *el pueblo*. The *vocho* is a material object that simultaneously signals proximity and dissonance. While this disassociation is in part the result of appropriating the car according to personal aesthetic tastes, it is also related to how the valences of the car have been transformed over the years—from being the car of the middle class (Gilbert 2007:38–40; Rieger 2013:276–277) to being the car of those who are said not to work hard enough to be able to afford a bigger, more luxurious car. This transformation is related to how *el pueblo* has come to be regarded in a society where even though socio-economic conditions have declined, simultaneously class status remains significant. Class appearances in Mexico are not only about displaying economic power but, as I will show, also signify personal traits and values. The
Beetle then becomes a medium that enables the mimicry of class distinctions, not only to symbolize upward mobility but also to index the core values of capitalism and liberal democracy: hard work, entrepreneurship, individual autonomy, and self-making. Although the vocho is transformed as a way to disassociate the car and driver from el pueblo, the car simultaneously becomes a nexus of social relations among working class males. Significantly, as we will see, while transforming the Beetle indexes an orientation towards individual values, how this transformation is carried out and the social relations that the car enables partially disrupt the principle of individual autonomy.

1.1 The Many Faces of El Pueblo

At first, Lalo’s description of the vocho as the car of el pueblo sounds like either a mistranslation or a re-translation of the Beetle’s German name: der Volkswagen, “The People’s Car.” Lalo, however, is repeating a story that he read in his favorite book, A Never-Ending Story (Schreiber 1998), that he bought at the souvenir shop at Volkswagen de México.25 A few years ago, he, his father and uncles, and a number of members of the car club Vochoclub Mexico City toured the Volkswagen factory in Puebla. From this book, Lalo learned that the Beetle is the car of el pueblo.

On page 32 of that book, a picture of Lázaro Cárdenas, perhaps the most beloved president of Mexico (1934 – 1940), appears next to the chassis and engine of a Beetle, accompanied by Volkswagen staff and the director of Volkswagen Exports. It was taken at the

25 The book is written in Spanish, English, and German and is a celebratory narrative of the different maneuvers undertaken by Mexicans with German family backgrounds and later the Mexican government that made Volkswagen’s arrival to Mexico in 1965 possible. It is the history of Volkswagen in Mexico from the perspective of the company as well as of Germans and Mexicans who have been involved with Volkswagen de México.
German Industrial Exposition in Mexico City in 1954. The caption reads “Lázaro Cárdenas and los Volkswagen.” This picture, the story goes, was later reproduced and circulated in the front pages of all the major newspapers with the caption “El hombre del pueblo, ve el coche del pueblo”— “The man of el pueblo [as Cárdenas is affectively remembered in Mexico] takes a look at the car of el pueblo.” Cárdenas is remembered as the man of el pueblo because of the push that he gave to land re-distribution, the nationalization of the oil industry, and the strengthening of unionized labor. His reforms aimed to include a greater majority of Mexicans in the project of nation-state formation.

The picture of Cárdenas with the Beetle’s engine, as the caption suggests, evokes the possibility of yet another path of inclusion in the modernist project of the nation-state—in this case, el pueblo driving their cars on the many roads and highways that were at that time under construction as part of the making of the post revolutionary Mexican state (1925 – 1960) (Fulwider 2009). Such ideas of inclusion through mass motorization (and production) were not confined to Mexico. In Germany, Adolf Hitler envisioned the Volkswagen Beetle as the car manufactured by German workers for their families: the German Volk (Rieger 2013:52). Hitler’s vision of the working class having access to and driving cars is encapsulated by how he named the Beetle: Volkswagen, which in English has been translated as “the people’s car.” However, historian Bernhard Rieger argues that Volk is “imperfectly translated in English as ‘the people’ thus erasing [its] racial overtones.”26 The Beetle as the car of the Volk is the car of a racially homogenous working class.

26 The ‘people’ is not a given either. For the emergence of this category see Edmund Morgan’s Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America (1988).
Similarly, *el pueblo*, while also a political abstraction and deployed in different manners (Eiss 2010), cannot be translated accurately as “the people” either. *El Pueblo* can be defined differently and is polyvalent: it can refer to a village or town, or a group of people that form a community or have the same nationality, or a particular place where people live who are from different nationalities and ethnicities. It can be a group of people located in different geographical places but connected by religion or some other bond. It can also refer to “a group of people who belong to the social classes that have less - *que menos tienen* – in opposition to *los pueydientes* – the wealthy, powerful, and influential.” The *people* thus erases the class connotations that *Das Volk* and *El pueblo* carry within, in their original languages. Both of these terms invoke the working class, the masses.

Like *Das Volk*, *el pueblo* also carries within it racial underpinnings and exclusions. *El pueblo* is shaped by the “racial project of mestizaje (racial and cultural mixture) and its imposition as the official national ideology” (Moreno Figueroa and Saldivar Tanaka 2016: 516). This project has sought to construct Mexico as a “raceless” country where there is no racism (ibid). Mestizaje – as an ideology and as a myth - has not only constructed a sense of equality where everybody is equal and everybody has the same opportunism regardless of skin color but importantly, it has also denied the existence of black people in Mexico and has obfuscated the legal recognition of indigenous people (ibid 523; Saldivar Tanaka 2014). As Monica Moreno Figueroa and Emiko Saldivar Tanaka argue, “Mexico’s ‘raceless’ ideology of mestizaje [enables processes] of racial and racist normalization” and naturalizes racism (2016: 516; Saldivar 2014).

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27 The example given in Spanish dictionaries of the usages of *el pueblo* is “*el pueblo* exploited by the oligarchy” (my translation). *El pueblo* in Mexico and throughout Latin America is a ubiquitous concept, idea, referent, and identification, yet it is not “a timeless framework for social, political and religious life” (Eiss 2010:4). For how “*El Pueblo*” has been mobilized in the past and the present in Yucatan, Mexico see Eiss’ *In the Name of El Pueblo* (2010).
Thus *el pueblo* has been shaped by histories and processes of racial inclusion/exclusion and denial.

The *vocho* as “the car of *el pueblo*” is a representation that relies on a racially homogenous collective and a stable and timeless working class. In 1956, when this representation first emerged, the Beetle as “the car of *el pueblo*” drew its meanings and referents from the formation of the working class and from an industrialization project that had only just began. Although *el pueblo* in connection to Lázaro Cárdenas, as “the man of *el pueblo,*” encompassed peasants, industrial workers, rural teachers, peons, the Mayo and Yaqui Indians (Knight 2008), Mexicans who had been working in the U.S., the *repatriados* (repatriates) (Walsh 2008), while also excluding black and indigenous people— the Beetle as “the car of *el pueblo*” ultimately meant the urban proletariat. It refers to an “imagined community” (Anderson 1983), a collectivity constituted by those already involved in industrial labor: car production (Bachelor 2001), steel and railroad workers (Snodgrass 2003), as well as textile workers, who by the 1950s were swelling the ranks of the working class. The *vocho* as “the car of *el pueblo*” then is represented as the car of an urban male and racialized collectivity shaped by industrial work and working class politics.

This socio-economic context also brings to the forefront Mexico’s visions of development projects oriented to industrial labor. During the Cárdenas years, “instead of importing finished goods from abroad, Mexico proceeded to manufacture its own production for consumption” (Smith 2008:85). The Second World War “provided substantial impetus for Mexico’s nascent industrial development by cutting back the flow of imports from the United States” (ibid). Prior to the 1960s, industrial production was not yet labor intensive (ibid). However, by the 1960s, industrial development was pushed even harder with import substitution industrialization (ISI) policies, that in 1962 led to the creation of the Mexican automobile
industry. Although industrialization was framed during these years as a move to economic independence, multinational corporations have played a significant role throughout the process. In the past, the manufacturing of the Beetle in Mexico was the product of the processes of making an industrialized nation. The production of this commodity was represented as transforming Mexico into an economic power. Nostalgically, this fantasy is today kept alive in how a number of people from different social backgrounds who grew up in the 70s and 80s describe the Beetle as a trace of the Mexico that never became.  

Although the Beetle is represented as “the car of *el pueblo*,” prior to 1967 the car was imported from Germany and was unaffordable for the large majority of Mexicans. A Beetle collector in Mexico City known as Miguelito owns a 1960 Beetle manufactured in Germany. Today the car is in one of the three houses he purchased to store his collection of Beetles. This particular Beetle is special to him not only because of where it comes from, but also because it was purchased by his grandmother. Next to the black Beetle sits a picture of his grandmother driving her new as car as she leaves the German car dealership.

It was only in 1989 that the price of a Beetle manufactured in Mexico decreased. It now became the car of “the poor” (Juárez Nuñez 1990) —i.e., a large majority of those involved in wage labor, teachers, and low-paid bureaucrats. Many Beetles that today circulate in Mexico, such as those driven to the *Zócalo* as part of the Caravan of the Famous Volkswagen, were bought around that time. It was towards the end of the 1980s that the Beetle was within the reach of those who didn’t belong to the professional middle class (Rieger 2013:277). The Mexican government sought to make cars cheaper by decreeing that cars below 14 million *pesos* (about

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28 After the end of the manufacturing of the Beetle was announced, many wealthy Mexicans bought the Beetle ‘Last Edition’ which only they could afford (Rieger 2013:287).
US$ 5000 at that time) would be eligible for a tax break (ibid.). Volkswagen cut the Beetle’s price 20% to “‘make cars more affordable in Mexico,” as the company declared in a full-page newspaper ad” (ibid). This measure was a palliative to the harsh socio-economic conditions after Mexico’s debt crisis, *la crisis* in the 1980s, a period known as “the lost decade” in Latin America—which culminated in structural adjustment policies proposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (Phillips 1998:xv). During this period, factories closed down and by 1986 almost two-thirds of urban households had incomes below the official poverty line (Hellman 1994:9; Lomnitz 2003). By the 1990s, the Beetle finally became “*el carrito del proletariado*” (the proletariat’s little car), as Joel, an ex-Volkswagen worker, explained to me. Yet, the dream was short-lived. In 1995, one year after the signing of NAFTA, Mexico faced another harsh economic crisis (Lomnitz 2012).

Either as a symbol or as an affordable car, the *vocho* as “the car of *el pueblo*” is infused with, and throughout the years has retained, its class connotations. *El pueblo*, however, not only encompasses the industrial worker. It is constituted of a much wider class-based social spectrum, of different occupations, types of work, and subject formations. Thus, I now turn to examine who constitutes *el pueblo* today and how the Beetle is appropriated by the masses.

### 1.2 Circulating on the Streets and Across Generations

In addition to being a member in a car club, Lalo also owns his own *vocho*. Or rather, he has parts of a 1980 Beetle: the chassis with the wheels still connected, the engine, and the unmistakable oval roof of the car. This carcass was rescued from a car cemetery by his father, uncles, and other members of their car club and given to Lalo by his father on his ninth birthday. In the years since, Lalo and his father have worked together to restore his Beetle. Or rather, his
father, who is a mechanic and owns a small garage, is teaching Lalo, and Lalo is helping with the restoration. Whenever there is time and money, they – with the help of Lalo’s uncles – work towards transforming the broken-down Beetle into a vintage car that will once again roam the streets of Mexico, once Lalo is legally allowed to drive. Even though he doesn't have a *vocho* yet, he, along with his father and uncles, is a member of the Beetle car club, *VochoClub Mexico City*. To acknowledge his current car-less status, his nickname in the Beetle’s web chat forums is “*Lalo sin vocho*” (Lalo without a *vocho*).

The production of Beetle auto-parts ended in 2013. Yet, even though some number of these auto-parts were up to that date manufactured in Mexico, certain parts, especially for cars that are more than thirty years old, are imported from the United States or Germany, and are thus expensive. Lalo and his father, like most members of Beetle car clubs, obtain them almost for free by scavenging in car cemeteries. By paying less than a dollar to the watchman, they gain access to a wide range of broken-down Beetles from different years and in different states of decay, often piled on top of each other. They climb the piles of Beetles and retrieve the specific pieces they need as well as rare pieces, such as the motor lid of a 1970 Beetle. When they have the fortune to find such a piece, they re-introduce these pieces into the market economy by selling them on Latin America’s version of Ebay, *Mercado Libre* (free market). Money from these transactions is often invested in their personal *vochos*.

By scavenging, Lalo and his father are obtaining the pieces to restore and transform Lalo’s *vocho* into a car that he can drive. Restoring and fixing, however, do not only produce a tangible object. Through this practice, Lalo is also learning different skills such as the manual

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29. After the production of a car model ends, car manufacturers are required to continue its manufacturing for only ten years. The Beetle production ended in 2003.
skills required to re-build the body of the car or to piece together the parts of the engine. This acquisition of manual skills is a reversal of the de-skilling of workers that occurs in the manufacturing of a standardized mass-produced commodity such as the Beetle. Lalo is learning skills that he can only develop through a close relationship with his Beetle.

Lalo is also learning to “listen to the Beetle,” thus acquiring the sensorial skills needed to detect through sound problems with the engine or another part of the car. Restoring and fixing are practices that transmit different forms of knowledge and cultivate an affective and sensorial relationship with a *vocho*. Through these practices, the Beetle is transformed into a medium of transgenerational social relations among males.

To give a *vocho* to a son as a gift is common in the social world of Beetle car clubs. The social life of the *vocho* – its meanings, uses, and the social relations it mediates – is multilayered: Some are passed on to the next generation, and others are bought or, as in Lalo’s case, acquired in pieces. The particular *vocho* given to Lalo was one of the fifty thousand green Beetles turned into taxis that circulated in Mexico City up to 2000. It was an instrument of work to make a living. Lalo’s father’s own 1969 blue Beetle, on the other hand, is an object that has traveled across generations. The *vocho* that today transports Lalo, his sister, his mother, and his father originally belonged to Lalo’s grandfather. Lalo even says that his father was almost *born* in the blue Beetle when his grandfather was driving his grandmother to the hospital. The car also transported the grandfather to his workplace in a factory in Mexico City.

To keep this Beetle running on the streets of Mexico City, Lalo’s father worked hard to maintain it. Caring for the car, however, exceeds the practicality of having an instrument of

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30 I found only one case where a woman in her early twenties was a member of a car club and driving her father’s Beetle. Her father had passed away and since then she has been taking care of the car; most of her earnings from her job are put into the car.
mobility. Lalo’s father, like Lalo, is a member of a Beetle car club. The Beetle whose driver belongs to a Beetle car club is an object to be displayed, to be seen and admired. The Beetles in car clubs are not only functional but are also strikingly well taken care of—either restored to their original conditions or modified; they are clean, polished, and shiny. At the meetings of Beetle car clubs taking place in the parking lots of malls, vochos are parked next to each other offering a spectacle that entices passersby to pull out their cell phones to take pictures. And while these vochos are valued because of their instrumentality—mobility, family transportation, etc.—they are not mundane objects. At car club meetings, members don’t allow passersby to touch vochos and members don’t even rest their bodies on their own cars.

The vochos that are passed down across generations are embedded in family relations and memories. Members of Beetle car clubs describe pictures of themselves as kids sitting on the front trunk of a Beetle. Often similar scanned pictures are circulated on Facebook, where the aesthetics of the 70s, 80s and 90s are appreciated. In a large number of cases, the vocho in the picture is the same one that is driven to club meetings today. Other memories are more elaborate and are often re-told at social gatherings organized by car clubs. The dearest childhood memory of Hugo, a member of Air Cooled Puebla in his thirties, is connected to, and was enabled by, a Beetle. During a dinner with car club members and their families in downtown Puebla, he repeated for me a story that everyone else had already heard:

My father was driving with us to Tlaxcala to drop 40 kilos of something to one of the VW suppliers when he asked us ‘do you want to meet the clouds?’ (quieren conocer las nubes?). I don’t remember [my sister’s] or my age but I remember that our feet didn’t yet touch the back of the front seats. We both excitedly answered ‘¡sí!’ So my father drove us
to a very steep hill. It took so much time and the vocho was very slow but steady. I will never forget how the vocho took us all to the clouds.

The Beetle is a beloved family object circulating across generations, embedded in memories and family’s modes of relationality. But the vocho as “the car of el pueblo” signals a spectrum of working class trajectories and subject formation across temporalities. Hugo’s father is involved in petty commodity production and has a small-scale business that supplied to one of Volkswagen’s suppliers. Lalo’s grandfather, on the other hand, was an industrial worker in a factory in Mexico City in the mid-70s when Lalo’s father was born. Today, Lalo’s father is a car mechanic. Lalo, his grandfather, and father as well as Hugo’s father illustrate the heterogeneity of the working class. The vocho is the car of the industrial worker, the self-employed laborer, and the petty commodity producer. While each of them entails different subject formations – related to generation, lifestyle, type of work, social relations and milieu– all of them belong to el pueblo, the collectivity of the ordinary working class Mexican.

1.3 “A Loyal and Simple Car”

In the collective imaginary, vochos are described as a “very simple car” (un coche muy sencillo). This “simplicity” means the car is easy to manipulate, easy to fix, reliable, and contains cheap, easily replaceable auto parts.31 Vochos are described as loyal cars (coches confiables). Stories circulate among Beetle fans that illustrate the car’s “simplicity.” The three most common stories go as follows: while a guy was driving on the highway from Puebla to Oaxaca, el vocho se

31 Other vocho drivers describe it as “not need[ing] much” (quoted in Rieger 2013:282). Volkswagen air-cooled cars are described as ‘simple’ by many drivers across the globe. “Simplicity” and “easy to fix” reproduce the script of Volkswagen’s advertising campaigns of Beetles as “simple yet reliable technology” (ibid. 283; see also Frank 1998).
descloché, meaning that the shifting pedal needed to change gears broke. The guy found zacate, a type of vine, in a nearby meadow and used it to connect the clutch. Another story details how the vocho is put back on the road in a simple, easy, quick, and cheap manner by using a belt. If the engine’s belt breaks, the driver simply takes off his waist belt to replace it and the engine continues working. The third story describes a broken accelerator pedal. In this situation, the driver needed a strong and long string to get the car moving again. By tying one end of the string to the accelerator, which is located in the engine at the back of the car, and holding the other end in his hand, the driver can “accelerate” by pulling the string towards himself. Pedestrians and other drivers would see a string going from the engine to the driver’s window. If needed, this solution would keep the vocho mobile for days. These handy solutions te sacan del apuro - a colloquial expression that refers not only to the immediate problem, such as the break itself, but also to the economic possibility of solving that problem right away. Strings, like the spare wheel, electrical fuses, oil, and brake fluid, are a must in a Beetle driver’s toolbox.

Ease of access to the Beetle’s materiality, to its engine, and to the most important components that keep the car on the road without the need of an expert – unlike new cars -- are praised by drivers around the world. “Simplicity” was a feature that distinguished the Beetle from the cars manufactured by the Big Three (Ford, Chrysler, and General Motors) and was used to introduce the car in the United States in the 1960s (Frank 1998). The script of “easy to fix” was also evoked in Germany when the car was first manufactured by and for Das Volk. The technical qualities of the car were advertised as fulfilling the regime’s promise to offer an affordable, low maintenance car and reliable product (Rieger 2013:74). Later, after the Second World War in West Germany, the Beetle’s technical qualities continued to be emphasized (ibid).

“Simplicity” and “easy to fix,” however, take on a different meaning and entail different practices and relationships with the Beetle in Mexico. When the representation of the Beetle as
“the car of el pueblo” emerged (1954) and when Volkswagen began preparations to open a factory in Mexico (1964), the country was considered to be a new and promising market for cars (Bennett and Sharpe 1985). Between 1940 and 1970, Mexico’s inward development strategy through import substitution industrialization enabled a sustained and steady economic growth (Smith 2008), a period popularly known as “the Mexican Miracle.” Mexico was considered “the Japan of Latin America” (Rieger 2013:262).

This economic growth did positively impact people’s lives, such as Mexican industrialist families trading in textiles or steel, as well as the small upper and middle classes. It also created a working class, and many of those working in the industries experienced social mobility. Yet nevertheless, the Beetle, despite its representation as the car of el pueblo, remained the car of “the independent as well as salaried professionals, managers, teachers, technicians, bureaucrats, and merchants” (ibid: 273). As a number of newspaper advertisements from those years attest, it was the car that drove engineers to the sites where infrastructures of the modern nation state – highways and dams – were being built. In 1967, when Beetles were manufactured at the Volkswagen factory in Puebla, the Minister of Industry stated that the “low price of the car filled a ‘gap’ in Mexico’s automotive landscape because it targeted Mexico’s small urban middle class” (ibid). The Beetle’s “proliferation on the streets not only reflected the social status of successful middle-class Mexicans but [also] the country’s gradual economic progress at large” (ibid).

For the large majority of the urban working class who were able to buy a Beetle, the car was purchased second-hand. Within a working-class milieu, the Beetle’s materiality – the easy access to its engine and its air-cooling system, the availability of auto parts in car cemeteries, the car’s malleability without the need of an expert – “simplicity” and the script of “easy to fix” became even more significant after the 1980s’ economic crisis. The IMF loans were granted
under the conditions of economic restructuring, which meant the shifting of the economy
towards the world market. Structural adjustment emphasized wage freezes, decreases in public
expenditure, and support for exports (Phillips 2008:xv). By 1988, the minimum wage was worth
only half its 1981 value, and by 1992 it had sunk to only 37 percent of what it had been in 1981
(Hellman 1999:9).

The culmination of economic restructuring came in 1994 with the signing of the North
American Free Trade Agreement. The agreement, combined with artificially low wages, has
transformed Mexico into a hub of manufacturing for exportation. The conjuncture of an economy
oriented to exportation and the decline of social welfare programs have not created a poor
country but rather a country where many people are very wealthy but the large majority of the
population lives under the poverty line. Within this socio-economic context, the “simplicity” of
the Beetle has practical implications. Access to the materiality of the Beetle opens the possibility
for el pueblo to own a car and to be mobile in a country increasingly made for cars. Significantly,
access to the Beetle’s materiality has helped many people, if and when the car breaks down, to
fix it themselves or to postpone paying a mechanic to fix it. The Beetle’s “simplicity” allows for
simple solutions that solve the problem immediately, inexpensively, and without halting mobility
for very long.

“Simplicity” allows for fixing, modifying, restoring, and caring for vochos. Access to the
car’s materiality plays a role in the constitution of affective attachments to the Beetle.
Significantly, restoring, fixing, modifying, and caring are practices that entail labor and time.
However, labor and time are not commodified such as in a wage labor relationship. When
restoring, fixing, and modifying the Beetle, the driver is not estranged from the product of his
labor, from the act of production, from his species’ being, or from other people (Marx 1978:70–
81). Neither labor nor time is objectified: they are not measured or abstracted from social
relations. Time—as social time—is embedded in labor where fixing, restoring, and transforming are often done with the help of friends and family. Time is also the temporality of someone’s life entwined with the Beetle. Labor and time constitute the *vocho* as a nexus of family, community, and trans-generational relationships, as well as relationships among working class males, allowing the car to circulate across space and time, and transforming it into an object that enables forms of sociality and into a mnemonic device that recalls stories. Significantly, the Beetle’s materiality has created a relationship between car and driver, a sense of communion between the two, and this is key to how drivers relate to their *vochos*.

However, while my interlocutors reproduce the script of “loyalty” widely used in Volkswagen’s advertising campaigns, their colloquial usage moves away from “reliable technology” and points to a more a more visceral connection between drivers and *vochos*. As Oscar, a member of the car club *Air Cooled Puebla* explains,

> You develop a sixth sense with your car or something like that [and] cultivate a relationship with your car; [you] feel [and you] know when something is wrong. One day, I felt that something was wrong with my *vocho* even though nothing looked or sounded abnormal. I took it to the mechanic and indeed something was not ok.

*El vocho* as part of a working class social milieu has been appropriated as an instrument of mobility and work and an object that is passed across generations, not only for sentimental reasons but also because not everybody can afford a new car as their first car.\(^{32}\) Regardless of the

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\(^{32}\) Cars, even if manufactured in Mexico, are expensive. The Volkswagen Gol is the cheapest car in Mexico yet it is manufactured in Brazil.
economic rationality and the need for an instrument of mobility in a country that is ever-more made for cars, the *vocho* is transformed into an object of endearment—one that takes on life-like-qualities and becomes a family member of sorts. As an object that it is passed on, the *vocho* becomes a family heirloom. Significantly, access to the Beetle’s materiality that allows for the practices of restoring, fixing, and modifying not only keeps a car on the road but is also the means to transform the car from its ordinary appearance into an object that reflects personal aesthetic tastes. Through its transformation, the car becomes a medium to differentiate a working-class male from the rest of *el pueblo*.

![Figure 1. A Beetle fan displaying his *vocho* on the streets of Guanajuato, Mexico as part of the annual Beetle party *Vochofiesta*.](image)

1.4 Vochos and Mexican Masculinities

Edgar’s green 1972 *vocho* is the first car his father could afford, and was purchased second-hand. When Edgar was a child, the Beetle, besides transporting the family—parents and two children—was also used to transport large quantities of items such as canned milk, toilet paper, or rice to stock his father’s small grocery store, which to this day is the source of the family income. As a
kid, Edgar accompanied his father to buy all the necessary goods to stock the store. When he turned eighteen, Edgar began helping his father by going alone to buy the items for the store. Around that time, the *vocho* became Edgar’s.

Edgar is a twenty-three year-old college student in Criminology in one of the small private universities that have sprung up in Mexico since the 2000s. On weekends, he works as a promoter of liquor, beer, cigarettes, and cell phones at supermarkets. His job involves inviting people via a microphone to come to the stand. It is not a stable job but that is one of the reasons he likes it: during the week he is in college and, at times, as part of his school training, he works twice a week on the night shift in the forensic services office at the police department. He likes his job as a promoter because “it is fun because you are in a stand with music, you can dance and are with people [mostly women].”

As a non-married man who still lives with his parents and sister, Edgar can invest most of his earnings in his green *vocho*. With the help of fellow members from the car club *Air Cooled Puebla*, he has restored, fixed, and modified his *vocho*. Since the *vocho* became his, he has transformed it from its austere and unkempt appearance into an eye-catching dark low-rider green Beetle with black leather seats, a chrome engine, and silver shiny rims. In addition to chroming the engine, Edgar installed a system that consumes double the gasoline in order to make the car drive faster. On Fridays, Edgar and his green *vocho* attend the meetings of the car club *Air Cooled Puebla* in the parking lot of the mall *Plaza Crystal* and on Sundays after midnight, he meets other men in the parking lot of a different mall to race.

Although he likes and proudly shows off how he has transformed the engine, Edgar also acknowledges that the car now consumes too much gasoline, which is expensive. Unlike his father, Edgar has named his *vocho* after a movie character from the Mexican Golden Age of Cinema (1936 - 1959): *Pepe el Toro*, a carpenter and “a hardworking man (though he
accidentally ended up in prison) who took good care of his young and orphaned sisters and yet had a number of romantic partners” (Rubenstein 2001: 148). Pepe el Toro’s movies depicted the class distinctions and unequal distribution of wealth in Mexican society during the 1940s and 1950s.

Edgar’s transformation of the family vocho signals interconnected transformations. The passing of the car from father to son and the transformation of the physical appearance of the vocho have also meant a transformation in what the car means, its uses, and what it represents and indexes. As Edgar’s father’s car, the vocho transported the family; it was an instrument of mobility and of work and a medium of sociality between father and son as well as a way to begin immersing Edgar in the family’s business. Today, Edgar’s green vocho, while still an instrument of mobility that takes him to the places he needs to go, is also used to race with other men. The vocho is a medium to forge a gendered identity (Gutmann 2010), one that is different from his father’s. Edgar’s green vocho has been transformed from being the car of the family man and the breadwinner, to being the car of a single young male who has no economic responsibilities yet. The car continues to be a medium of male sociality. But this sociality is now among working class men from different ages, occupations, and relationship statuses. Significantly, Edgar’s green vocho, Pepe el Toro, indexes individual aesthetic tastes. The car is an extension of him. By

33 Pepe el Toro is a 1952 film and it is the third film of a trilogy. It was preceded by Nosotros los pobres (We the Poor 1948) and Ustedes los Ricos (You the Rich 1948). The three films depict the social life of those living in Mexico City’s slums. The actor Pedro Infante was known as el idolo del pueblo, “the pueblo’s idol.”

34 Male characters during the Golden Age era “reflected intellectuals’ ideas about working-class masculinity. But where [writer] Octavio Paz and [anthropologist] Oscar Lewis linked Mexican manhood to Mexico’s troubles, the movies celebrated the same stereotypical vision of masculinity. Starts like Jorge Negrete [and] Pedro Infante […] played roles ranging from singing cowboys to singing cops and singing automobile mechanics, and they always showed […] men as heroic. Even when they were comic figures, these starts played characters who were bold, tough, competent, loyal, loving, and resourceful. These movies transformed the stereotype of the Mexican macho from a national menace to a source of national pride” (Macías-González and Rubenstein 2012:13–14).
transforming the Beetle from its standardized appearance, Edgar and his vocho are disassociated from the ordinary Mexican, the masses.

1.5 The Despised One and the Self-Made Man: Vochos and Class Belongings

On a Friday evening while waiting for the rest of the Air Cooled Puebla members, Gonzalo tells me the story of his 1993 vocho. Sitting on a narrow sidewalk by the parking lot and facing the back wheel of his vocho, Gonzalo explains that when he was about to start college, his father gave him a new blue Beetle as a gift. “He used to work for one of Volkswagen’s dealerships, so he got an employees’ discount.” In Mexico, giving a car to a child is a way to mark the rite of passage into adulthood. To this day, Gonzalo still drives the vocho that his father gave him.

The vocho that Gonzalo’s father gave him more than twenty years ago is not the same as the car that today makes passersby stop and take pictures. When he received it as a gift, the vocho was like any other Beetle that comes out of the assembly line: a mass-produced model with standard and austere features, like thousands of identical vochos driving on the streets. After two years of driving his Beetle, his sister, who received a second hand Volkswagen Corsar as a gift from her father, started looking down at Gonzalo’s vocho because “no es un buen coche.” Often, “not a good car” doesn’t refer to the mechanics of the car or its functionality but means that the car is “not a fancy and expensive car.”

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35 This social custom also aims at performing a well-off economic status, and is only practiced by families that can afford such a gift. Depending on the family income, when children have reached the legal age to drive (18 years), they might get a new or a second-hand car. Many families can’t afford cars – neither for the parents nor the children.
Although cars have signaled class mobility for over a century, consumption in the new millennium is not only a site to create an identity but it also signals a shifting perception. Comaroff and Comaroff argue that “as consumption became the moving spirit of the late twentieth century, so there was a concomitant eclipse of production; an eclipse, at least, of its perceived salience for the wealth of nations” (2001:4; italics in original). But this shift has created a particular perception of social class belongings. Consuming particular commodities such as “fancy cars” has become a strong referent for social class and status in Latin America (Edelman and Haugerud 2005). Belonging to “the middle class [in Mexico] depends more on perception than on economic status” (Cahn 2008:440). Class membership is based on establishing the proper cultural capital and the conspicuous consumption of expensive or foreign items (Freeman 1998; ODougherty 2002). Consuming (or not) a “good car” acts as a boundary that demarcates social status and belongings (or not) into ‘the middle class.’

While the Beetle is a beloved object in the car clubs and is described as a “very Mexican car,” the car is not an endearing object to all. Mario, a designer and freelance photographer, and Jorge, a clothing designer and professor at a private university in Puebla, explained to me individually that the vocho is driven by “mediocre people who never made it into the middle class.” Laura, who was a student at a private university in the mid-90s and today teaches at Volkswagen’s [upper class] high school, recalls that among students a common question to socially locate classmates was “Are you driving a car or a vocho?” (¿vienes en coche o en vocho?).

In the imaginaries of those outside of Beetle car clubs, the vocho is at best acceptable as a first car. Within a quasi-evolutionary logic of class mobility, the Beetle, at some point, has to be exchanged for “un buen coche” or a “fancy car” so as to index a step upward on an invisible but very real social ladder. Nowadays, the vocho is the car of the “lazy Mexican that didn’t work
hard enough” to be able to afford a “better” car. The *vocho* then becomes an object that socially and economically locates people. It is a derogative class signifier and a stigma.

The comments that characterize the *vocho* as the car of the “mediocre” and “lazy” Mexican construct class mobility as only an individual achievement rather than as influenced by the structural conditions in which social lives unfold. These comments bring to the forefront the significance of class appearance in Mexico while also highlighting that class is not a form of membership, but positionality in relation to processes of capitalist accumulation (Harvey 1996), a form of *habitus* and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1985).

The construction and representation of the working class as not prone to achieving social mobility is not new. Around the time when the representation of the Beetle “as the car of *el pueblo*” emerged in the 1950s, Mexico became a mostly urban nation rather than a rural one (Joseph et al. 2001; Smith 2008). Rapid urbanization between the 1940s and 1960s unfolded in the context of “uneven economic development and inadequate urban infrastructure, as well as an increasingly corrupt, powerful, and unresponsive central government [that] made Mexican cities violent, uncomfortable and unhealthy places to live” (Macías-González and Rubenstein 2012:13). Mexican intellectuals such as Octavio Paz “blamed Mexico’s social and economic ills on the figure of the working-class urban men” (ibid). The imaginary working class males were,

Often referred as *pelados* or –when they were migrants to or from the United States – *pachucos.*[^36] [They] supposedly blocked progress and development in Mexico because

[^36]: *Pelado* literally is the past tense of “to peel off”; it can mean a short haircut associated with the military. But it also means ‘to own nothing.’ *Pelados,* it is popularly said, have not even a place where they can drop dead (*no tiene ni donde caerse muerto*). *Pelado* means to be poor and marginal but also to be outside of ‘society’s values and morals.’
they were violent, touchy, suspicious, womanizing loners who could not commit
themselves to a marriage or a job (ibid 13).37

Stereotypical constructions of Mexican men as violent and as womanizers who don’t commit to
anything are pervasive (Gutmann 2007). But just as persistent is the stereotype of laziness that is
widely used to construct a gendered working class identity. I never heard those who describe people driving a vocho as being “lazy” and “mediocre”
mention that such people are also blocking progress and development, though in Mexico as in
many places in the world it is assumed that social mobility is also a sign of economic
development.

Moreover, not achieving the social mobility signified by a “good car” is read as a
personal failing. But the valences of the vocho have also been transformed in relation to the place
of industrial labor in Mexico. While in the past industrial labor and the making of a working
class were deeply connected to processes of nation state formation, today industrial and manual
labor is cheap labor in maquiladoras. Significantly, while industrial labor has lost its valence in
Mexico, the number of people doing this type of work has increased.

In a society in which class appearance matters not only to show off economic power but
also to signal personality traits and a gendered identity, quite unsurprisingly Gonzalo’s pride was
hurt by his sister’s comments. His wounded pride, in turn, motivated him to transform his vocho
from a standardized mass commodity driven by the masses into an individualized and
conspicuous vocho that not only reflects personal aesthetic tastes but also indexes a different

37 It is at this time that “masculinity is equated with machismo” by Mexican intellectuals such as Octavio Paz
(Macías-González and Rubenstein 2012:13). The counterpart of the pelados and pachucos is the “traditional
Mexican woman – overly religious, fearful, conservative and family obsessed” (ibid).
understanding of el pueblo. By customizing and painting his vocho as well as by adding expensive rims, a smaller and smoother steering wheel, leather seats, electric windows, and complex sound and alarm systems, Gonzalo wanted to show that vochos too are “good cars.” While still in college studying computer science at the public university and working part-time, he saved his salary and invested it into his vocho. Over time, he refurbished the car’s interior in leather—the same color as the seats—as well as the trunk, located at the car’s front. In the trunk, he installed a device that generates enough electricity to feed the stereo, loudspeakers, alarm system, electric windows, and the hydraulic system that at the touch of a button transforms the Beetle into a low-ride. He re-painted his vocho with a mix of blues, in order to create a “unique shade of blue” that none of the Beetles coming straight from the factory would have. Gonzalo re-appropriated the vocho as an object of pride. To always remember that in his family nadie lo quería “no one loved the car,” Gonzalo named his transformed Beetle el Despreciado, “the despised one.”

When Gonzalo narrates the making of el Despreciado, he uses a lot of automotive, electrical, and mechanical jargon. He also describes how he learned from friends and magazines how to fix, restore, and paint as well as customize cars since he did all the work by himself or with the help of friends. Gonzalo likes to tell others about technical details and to give tips of “what you should or shouldn’t do when modifying your vocho.” But in between stories such as of changing the brakes for disc brakes or chroming the engine, he interjects how long it took him to save the money—which became more difficult after getting married and having a son—and how much time he spent working on the car as well as the many mistakes he made.

The skills that Gonzalo learned from making el Despreciado have now proven useful for making a living. After he lost his spot as the ‘the middle-man’ selling medicine for Puebla’s penitentiary, Gonzalo opened his own shop. He now runs a store that specializes in restoring,
fixing, and customizing cars, in particular Beetles. He explains that since rumor has it that drug lords’ families live in Puebla, there are many people who have the money needed to personalize their cars. These cars, as one might expect, are generally not Beetles but some members from Aircooled know a man who, among Porsches and other luxurious cars, also owns a vocho for sentimental reasons.  

Gonzalo’s vocho as a gift from his father signals a rite of passage into manhood; the making of el Despreciado signifies Gonzalo’s own passage into adulthood. A few years ago, Gonzalo displayed his vocho at a car exhibition. Among the people who were enthusiastically taking pictures of themselves with his cars were two women who caught Gonzalo’s attention. Politely, he offered to take a picture for them. This is how Gonzalo met his wife Liz. She likes to recall that they met thanks to el Despreciado. Continuing the practice that originated with his father, Gonzalo will pass el Despreciado to his son as a gift. At parking lots or at car exhibitions, passersby often ask if the blue vocho with brown leather seats is for sale, and Gonzalo always responds “No mi amigo, I’ll never sell this car; I’ll pass it on to my son.”

Woven into the story of el Despreciado are different events in Gonzalo’s life: his student days, rite of passage into manhood, adulthood, marriage, and fatherhood. The narrative of the making of el Despreciado evokes different forms of hard work: laboring to save money, working to transform the car, working to maintain his car, and working to teach his son to love and care  

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38 The conversation about opening his own shop to cater to people such as drug lords’ families happened on a Friday night among a group of friends who belong to the same car club. They were discussing the news that, according to the Mexican Association of the Automotive Industry AMIA (Asociacion Mexicana de la Industria del Automovil), while in the rest of Mexico the sales of luxury cars had decreased, it had increased in Puebla. For the members of Air Cooled Puebla, “if you are not Slim [Carlos Slim Helu, a Mexican who in 2013 was the number one billionaire in the world according to the Forbes list] or influential in the government, who else in Mexico has a lot of money?” Their comment also illustrates how Puebla is located in the geography of drug trafficking and money laundering in Mexico. Rumor has it that rival drug cartels have designated Puebla as a place for their families, thus the eruption of violence that characterizes other cities such as Tijuana is less visible.
about the *vocho*. The *vocho*, further, signifies transformations in Gonzalo’s own life: from son, to college student, to wageworker, and to entrepreneur as well as different stages in his life: from a college student who works but also depends on his parents to an independent man married and with a kid. The making of *el Despreciado* is Gonzalo’s narrative of the self-made man. In this narrative, the car not only symbolizes significant moments in Gonzalo’s life but also represents core liberal values –entrepreneurship, individual autonomy, self-making – and values of capitalism such as hard work. Through the dual-making Gonzalo and his *vocho* are disassociated from *el pueblo*. Through the car, Gonzalo mimics class positionality. More significantly, *el Despreciado* as a conspicuous and luxurious car not only displays that a *vocho* too can be a “good car” but now also indexes the opposite of “lazy” and “mediocre.”

### 1.6 Vocho as Social Nexus

While *el Despreciado* indexes the independent individual where the (re)making of the car is deeply entwined with a process of self-making, how the car was transformed also disrupts this narrative. More significantly, what this *vocho* entails in its present form shows how entrepreneurship and individual autonomy coexist with more traditional notions of masculinity and social relations among men. In the making of *el Despreciado*, though he did most of the work, Gonzalo was also helped by friends. The car and Gonzalo are embedded in a web of social relationships, as both of them belong to the “Beetle Brotherhood” – a group of Beetle fans that includes people within Mexico and beyond. More significantly, today *el Despreciado* enables Gonzalo to fulfill his fatherhood role.

Since *el Despreciado* will one day be passed on to Iker, Gonzalo’s four-year-old son, Gonzalo is cultivating the sense of care and attachment to his car in Iker. Every time Gonzalo is
fixing, restoring, or giving maintenance to his vocho, Iker is in the car too. Gonzalo is teaching him not only about the car but also how to care for this car in particular. Once in a while, Gonzalo also brings his son to the meetings at the car club. El Despreciado, while indexing individual values and embodying a life history, also enables a social relationship among men and between father and son.

Jonathan and his Beetle named Proyecto Fénix or Phoenix Project offer a story similar to Gonzalo’s. It is a story of dual transformation in which the car is made to index individuality and self-making. However, the car is transformed and the sociality that this transformation entails also disrupts ideas of individual autonomy. At the celebration of the Beetle’s birthday, Jonathan, who is in his early twenties, shows me his 1980 red vocho. Jonathan is with his father and mother. His father explains that a few years ago, he and his wife decided to give their oldest son a second-hand Beetle during his last year of high school. They thought of the car as an incentive for improving his grades. When the family went to pick up the second-hand vocho, Jonathan recounts, the engine didn’t start and the whole family ended up pushing the car to the mechanic. Annoyed, he wondered what the point was of being given a car that didn’t work.

Over time, the vocho became a family project. He, his mother, father, and brother sanded and painted the car, refurbished it, dismantled it, cleaned it, and put the engine back together, and restored the electrical and mechanical systems. From a standard and useless car Proyecto Fénix was transformed into a car with a chrome engine, gull-wing doors, hinges at the roof instead of the side, and a sophisticated and expensive sound system following the Tuning style. Over the years, this vocho has also become a neighborhood project: every time a neighbor finds an auto-part, they give it to Jonathan. For Jonathan’s father, the story of Proyecto Fénix is the story of his son. Naming the car Fénix is intended to refer to the mythological bird that is re-born from the ashes. In this story of transformations, Jonathan and his vocho have metaphorically re-emerged
from the ashes: He managed to graduate from high school with good grades and is now in college studying electrical engineering. His vocho too has been recognized. It has won prizes in the category of Sound System, where the loudest car is the winner.

*El Despreciado* and *Projecto Fénix* index meaningful social relations and events that have constituted the life-histories of their drivers. As both examples show, the vocho also emerges as a nexus of wider social relations. Through *El Despreciado* Gonzalo met his wife, and *Projecto Fénix* became a family and neighborhood project. Significantly, the making of both vochos illustrates how in this making, the driver and vocho shape each other. In this dual making, an intimate relationship between them is crafted.

The Beetle’s continuing circulation on the streets of Mexico, and in particular the practices of fixing, restoring, modifying, and caring for it, interrupt the logic of “planned obsolescence,” a key feature of car industries since the onset of car production. These practices have made the car circulate across generations and as part of people’s lives. They are key in constituting the relationship between Beetle and driver and transform the car into a nexus of inter-generational social relations and among working class men.

![Figure 2. Reunion of Beetle car club on a Saturday morning at a mall’s parking lot in Puebla.](image)
1.7 Conclusion

In the current socio-economic moment in which anything can be co-opted to create “market value” (Foster 2007), unsurprisingly the stories, memories, and practices that have made the Beetle an object of endearment are being snatched up by Volkswagen.

In March 2013, during follow-up research in Mexico, I was struck by how the New 2012 Beetle was advertised: *este vocho también mueve al mundo, sólo que más rápido,* “this vocho also moves the world, only faster.” *To move,* in this ad has a double meaning, one of which is the movement of the car, which is illustrated by the New Beetle circulating on a road with mountains in the background. The second meaning refers to being moved by strong feelings. My interlocutors agree that the New Beetle is indeed faster, more stylish, and pretty. However, to them, it is not a *vocho.* And it does not move them. According to them, the New Beetle is too expensive for many Mexicans. It is not the car of *el pueblo.* On top of that, a computer regulates all the systems that make the new Beetle function, so only an expert can fix it. It is “not a simple car.” The sophistication of the New Beetle makes it impossible for Gonzalo, Edgar, or Lalo to, as they say, *meterle la mano,* which literally means “to put your hands in the car” but is an expression that conveys how with your own hands you can fix, restore, and transform the *vocho.*

*El pueblo* is a political abstraction that either refers to the urban working class or peasants and indigenous people in rural areas. But it also has different meanings that have been shaped and deployed in relation to particular socio-historical moments and places (Eiss 2010). As I showed in this chapter, *el pueblo* has many faces—it is heterogeneous—and carries class and racial connotations. In the particular case of the *vocho* as “the car of *el pueblo,*” *el pueblo* has a double meaning: the hard working-class Mexican and “the lazy Mexican” who didn’t work hard enough to make it into the middle class.
Yet, by restoring, modifying and caring for the Beetle, working class men -and their families- not only continue to be mobile in a place that is continuously being shaped spatially for cars but through their practices the *vocho* is also a medium to re-craft the meaning of *el pueblo* in the everyday: a collectivity constituted by *hard-working males*. Simultaneously, it is through this re-crafting that *el pueblo* comes to index the entrepreneur, the self-made man and independent individual, thus disassociating the term from a set of more collective and communal values associated with *el pueblo*. *El pueblo* now embodies a set of individualized values. It is through these values – and their *vochos* - that *el pueblo* reclains its place in a stratified society. In the end, while the *vocho* is a medium to craft a new form of individuality, it simultaneously is a medium to craft sociality and social relations across generations and among working class males.
Chapter 2

2 Puebla is Volkswagen

In the midst of the global emission scandal that shook the Volkswagen Consortium in September 2015, Puebla Governor Rafael Moreno Valle declared to a local newspaper that the contract for 200 new police cars needed by the state in 2016 would go to Volkswagen de México. The rationale behind this move was that “in this complicated moment,” buying Volkswagen cars was a way to “defend” the jobs that the Volkswagen factory provides in Puebla.

The governor’s actions aimed to minimize the number of jobs at risk since the predicted decrease in car sales would unquestionably affect Volkswagen de México and could cause an overall slowdown in car production. Even as his proclamation was a practical and immediate response to possible unemployment, by throwing his support behind Volkswagen de México while the Volkswagen Consortium faced accusations of product tampering, he expressed and affirmed the long-standing ties among this transnational corporation, Puebla, and Mexico.

In this chapter, I explore this relationship by examining the ways in which the popular slogan “Puebla is Volkswagen” is often evoked not only to indicate where the factory is located but also to illustrate the ways in which the factory has become integral to the life of the city, its influence extending far beyond the confines of the factory grounds. The slogan signifies a relationship built between Puebla and Volkswagen de México constituted by the significance of the car economy and, more specifically, the jobs that the factory provides. As the Governor’s proclamation suggests, these jobs are a vital part in the relationship of exchanges between factory and city. These jobs, moreover, are not only those provided by the factory but also by all the suppliers supporting the car economy. Jobs are the conditions of possibility of a collectivity
represented by “Puebla is Volkswagen” and as such, they figure centrally in the celebratory account of the presence of Volkswagen in Puebla promoted by the government, media, the factory, and local people.

“Puebla is Volkswagen” is more than just a slogan. It is a window into the spatial and economic transformation of the landscape where Volkswagen de México is located today: It has been transformed from a rural area supporting peasant livelihoods into a center for global car manufacturing. In examining this transformation, I delve into the convergence of transnational capital, Mexico’s vision of development, and the legal apparatus needed to produce the space for car manufacturing via the expropriation of land. To fully comprehend this transformation and its implications, I juxtapose what was there prior to the car manufacturing monoculture with what stands there now. I illustrate how Volkswagen’s car production ruptured ways of being, livelihoods, social relations, and economies under the rationale of “jobs.”

“Puebla is Volkswagen” represents an entangled relationship. On the one hand, car production creates jobs and generates incomes. On the other hand, “jobs” are a site of unequal and incommensurable exchanges. The emphasis on the jobs that Volkswagen provides silences that the relationship between Puebla and Volkswagen is one of economic dependence and more important, it is a relationship constituted by the threat of the factory leaving that lurks in the background of the celebratory account of Volkswagen. Silences bring to the forefront the fragility of the relationship between city and factory.

“Puebla is Volkswagen” furthermore entangles land dispossession with jobs. Paying attention to this entanglement illustrates not only the exclusionary nature of the car economy but also the exclusionary nature of Mexico’s vision of economic development. Significantly, exclusions, while fueled by Volkswagen’s car economy, are also entrenched in Mexico’s processes of nation-state formation.
2.1 Jobs as Objects of Exchange

According to the Volkswagen factory’s 2013 Sustainability Report, there are 13,000 técnicos—female and male laborers—on the assembly lines and 5,000 white-collar workers in the areas of administration, marketing, and engineering. In addition to the workers Volkswagen de México employs directly, there is a large number of maquiladoras—Mexican and foreign owned—supplying materials to the factory that add to the overall number of people employed in the car economy or in related areas. Statistics appearing in local newspapers state that 8 out of 9 people in Puebla work in the car-manufacturing sector. Car production is not circumscribed by the limits of the factory grounds. Laying off workers or even slowing down production has a massive impact on every household in Puebla.

The presence of Volkswagen de México and more broadly the car economy has become crucial to the socio-economic life of the city—especially in terms of providing regional investments and local jobs. As the opening of this chapter illustrates, “jobs” contribute to the interactions constituting the relationship between the city of Puebla, the state, and Volkswagen. Police cars for jobs, infrastructure for jobs, fiscal exemptions for jobs or subsidies for jobs are just some examples of the exchanges between state and company. In a “utilitarian reading” of exchange (Taussig 1995:392), everybody benefits from it. It is a “win-win” situation for Puebla and Volkswagen de México.

39 These numbers do not specify the number of laborers who are unionized or the number under monthly contracts. Técnicos is how Volkswagen de México categorizes laborers on the assembly lines. For how this category emerged after the 1992 labor conflict, see Chapter Four.

40 By December 2012, the female workforce was 7.8% (assembly lines and administration); and the non-Mexican workforce was 0.7%.

41 There are roughly 250 Volkswagen suppliers in Mexico. People in “the informal economy”—for example the food vendors located outside of Volkswagen de México whose customers are Volkswagen’s workers are indirectly connected to the car economy.
This utilitarian understanding coexists with the premise that these “jobs” are an act of generosity. During a radio show broadcasted in 2014 to celebrate the 50-year anniversary of Volkswagen in Puebla, a female listener called in to communicate her opinion: fiscal exemptions are nothing when compared to all the jobs that the factory gives and the investments the Germans have made in Puebla. In her view, jobs and fiscal exemptions are not a mutually beneficial exchange but rather an unequal exchange in favor of the citizens of Puebla. The response of the radio host was, “No cabe duda de que los Alemanes son muy generosos” (there is no doubt that Germans are very generous).

The script of generosity reaches back to the early days of Volkswagen in Puebla. In December 1967, when the archbishop of Puebla blessed Volkswagen de México, he told the Germans who were present that the factory was “Puebla’s pride and glory” because “of the social work” it performed in “giving employment to many people, who provide the livelihoods for many families” (Rieger 2013:267–268). To this day, the archbishop’s words still resonate in Puebla. This is how Volkswagen is understood in Puebla: as a provider that gives jobs that enable workers to provide for their families. “Jobs” are an act of generosity.

The Catholic archbishop’s proclamation is also echoed by the factory. In its English-language media services webpage, Volkswagen de México defines its practice of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) as an “important contribution to the Mexican economy with new jobs and high export volumes.” Like many corporations, Volkswagen de México promotes education, sustainable development, health care, and environmentalism as mandated by their CSR. The corporate world hands these gifts to the communities where production or resource
extraction takes place (Rajak 2011:211). As anthropologist Dinah Rajak (2011) argues, CSR is the new language and practice of benevolence, generosity, and philanthropy that has shaped corporate capitalism since the 19th century in many locations around the world, including Mexico and the ex-colonies (Bachelor 2001; Cross 2016; Rajak 2011).

In the context of Volkswagen in Mexico, the gift takes the form of “jobs” and “economic growth.”

In light of how global industrial production has unfolded over the past 40 years, marked by deindustrialization and outsourcing, examples of flexible capital—industry without commitment to a place nor to a particular labor force (Harvey 1990)—Volkswagen’s CSR in the form of “jobs” speaks of a commitment to a place that has persisted for over 50 years. This commitment invites to be thankful for the continuity of automobile production in Puebla and the practice of “responsible capitalism” (Rajak 2011). Yet, this explanation reproduces “jobs” as an act of generosity. If “jobs” are the gift of CSR, then the question arises what kinds of relationships do “jobs” constitute and what do these relationships embody? What are the implications of “jobs” as an act of generosity?

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42 On Corporate Social Responsibility see Dolan and Rajak (2016); Welker (2014); Rajak (2011).

43 In the anthropological literature, CSR, as a discursive form of power, is not examined for “whether or not it ‘works’ or [if] it is good for business/development” (Gardner 2012:38) or just a “mere smokescreen [of a] unchanging capitalist order” (Rajak 2011:12). Instead, the discursive capacity of CSR in transforming social relations and creating projects according to a particular set of corporate values is the focus (de Neve 2009:ibid; see also; Dolan 2016). In the context of transnational corporations, CSR is presented as a new phenomenon in which social and ecological sustainability converge, putting corporations at the forefront of ‘responsible capitalism.’ CSR, Dinah Rajak (2011) argues, has striking continuities with older forms of corporate philanthropy -“benevolence, power, and profit.” Drawing out the patterns of continuity and change, she shows how old regimes of corporate paternalism are reinvented within a modern morality of social responsibility (ibid 10). Anthropological examinations of CSR have focused on how the corporation is enacted through CSR practice (Welker 2014), CSR as an ideology and practices that have a political agenda and as a strategy to curb possible critiques (Benson and Kirsch 2010), how CSR provides corporations with a moral mechanism and extending their authority over the social order (Rajak 2011) or how CSR practices are set to create a particular form of ‘community development’ to alleviate poverty (Gardner 2012).
“Jobs” are neither objects nor inalienable possessions (Mauss 2011; Malinowski 2014; Weiner 1992); yet as discussed above, “jobs” are given and are part of a relation of exchange. This exchange is not the practical and mutually beneficial exchange of jobs for police cars and should not even be termed simply as employment. Instead, “jobs” represent a social relationship between workers, employees, and Volkswagen de México.

Going beyond appearances, “jobs” at Volkswagen de México are the labor power that workers exchange for a wage. Labor power is the commodification of labor (Marx 1990a; see also Foley 1995) and, as Karl Polanyi argues, labor as a commodity is the separation of “labor from other activities of life, and [to] subject [it] to the laws of the market” (1944). Connected to labor power is labor time: time is abstracted from social life (Taussig 2010:5; Evans-Pritchard 1940; Thompson 1967).

In wage labor, time and labor are objectified and turned into a thing (Taussig 2010) that can be measured and quantified. The commodification of time and labor implies incommensurable exchanges. According Marcel Mauss, if a worker “gives his life and labor [then] those who benefit from his services are not square with him by paying him a wage” (2011 [1954]:65). Paraphrasing Mauss, anthropologist David Graeber writes that

A relation of wage labor [is] a miserable and impoverished form of contract […] In wage labor the worker does give of the totality of himself, he gives “his life and labor,” but the cash he receives in return has nothing of the same total quality about it. If one gives one’s life, one’s life should at least be guaranteed (2001:162).

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44 Building on the anthropology of the gift, Annette Weiner argues that it is necessary to identify what kind of object is being exchanged (1992); see also Collier and Rosaldo (1981) and Rubin (1975).
As Graeber points out, wage labor not only blurs incommensurable exchanges but also unequal exchanges. At Volkswagen de México, even though wages are among the highest within Mexico (Rieger 2013), they are the lowest within the context of global car manufacturing (Covarrubias Valdenebro 2014). In Mexico, state policies artificially depress wages to attract investment (Shaiken 1995:253). Incommensurable and unequal exchanges are intertwined forms of exploitation. Artificially depressed wages implicate the “structural power” (Wolf 1990:587) that shapes the social relations of the car economy.

“Jobs” as an act of generosity or as mutually beneficial exchange erase the inequality that structures global car manufacturing. But the most significant irony underpinning “jobs” as an act of generosity is that, simply put, without workers there would be no Volkswagen cars. Workers are indispensable for the ongoing production of cars. It is ultimately from them that surplus value is extracted.

### 2.2 A Collectivity

Volkswagen is so important for Puebla because it helps families, including mine. If Volkswagen leaves, Puebla loses; my family would leave. La Planta is important for the municipality, the state [Puebla], and Mexico. The factory is part of families [and together they form a] social nucleus. [This nucleus] is a chain [that encompasses] the municipality, the state [Puebla], and Mexico. We all benefit from it. *Todos somos Volkswagen* (we are all Volkswagen).
This is how Luis, a motivational coach, describes the presence of Volkswagen in Puebla, addressing about 100 Volkswagen laborers at a meeting organized by a group of workers contending in the election for Volkswagen’s next union committee. Since a competing committee called “We are all Volkswagen” hired Luis, the statement he makes can be interpreted as propaganda. What he has said, however, is actually a view held and shared by many people in Puebla.

The statement articulates, in a tangible manner, the same facts that Volkswagen de México, the government, and the media report. Luis’s evocation, while abstract, gives a human face to the numbers: “families including mine” are part of Volkswagen’s social nucleus. The “jobs” Volkswagen de México gives are symbolic of the relationship between Puebla and Volkswagen. His statement also reinforces the idea of collectivity that the slogan “Puebla is Volkswagen” evokes by the use of the pronoun “we.” In this collectivity, the factory is a “social nucleus” that binds together family, city, state, and country, putting Volkswagen de México in the center of socio-economic and social relations. The factory as the provider contributes to the well-being of the collectivity exemplified by the “we” – to its socialities, and socio-economic life. It is the representation of a homogenous, harmonious, and stable whole – a representation of el pueblo. In this light, Luis’s statement is an echo of the archbishop’s words uttered the day the factory was opened.

Luis’s statement also illustrates that this “collectivity” does not exist solely within the factory grounds. Besides factory, country, state, and municipality, this collectivity includes

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45 The statement was given during the 2011 union committee election in a campaign meeting called “Dialogues Instead of Conflicts” (Dialogos en lugar de conflictos). This approach did not resonate with Volkswagen’s workers. Not only did this committee lose the election by a large margin, but also, as one laborer told me at that meeting, “the slogan [we are all Volkswagen] is de naturaleza contraria (of contradictory nature).” This means that while the factory and workers share the interest of manufacturing cars, there are differences on how to achieve this; laborers are not the same as the factory. See chapters 4 and 5 for labor conditions at Volkswagen de México.
families living in the city. It encompasses the families of assembly line workers; the families of administrative staff; the families of those working for suppliers connected to car manufacturing, as well as the families of those such as Luis who offer services to either the factory or the labor force. “We” then becomes a coherent whole that cuts across social differentiation in relation to class and gender, as well as social differentiation based on cultural capital and status: unionized workers, nonunionized workers under monthly contracts, workers in suppliers, subcontracted workers, engineers, managers, and directors. “We all benefit from [Volkswagen]” doesn’t distinguish that within this “we”, benefits are not equally distributed.

Entwined with the slogan “Puebla is Volkswagen” is the claim that “La Volkswagen brought money.” Jobs represent money that streams into the city. In this popular understanding of “trickle-down economics,” those employed directly or indirectly by the car industry become consumers who then spend money in stores. This construct is highly apparent in the case of Volkswagen’s workers. During my strolls in downtown Puebla, while perusing newspapers and Volkswagen’s union magazine *Poder Sindical*, I often noticed that Volkswagen’s workers are hailed as potential consumers for services and products. Indeed, like the majority of the working class, these workers buy televisions, cell phones, and watches, go to restaurants or on vacation. Being an employee at *Volkswagen de México* is a guarantor for credit, as is indicated by a number of stickers on store windows that announce that Volkswagen’s credit is available at this store.

There is a particular commodity that sets Volkswagen’s workers apart from workers in other factories. Quite a few of Volkswagen’s workers drive the very cars they manufacture. While many of these are secondhand cars, Volkswagen employees and workers—of the unionized labor force and in the highest wage ranks—lease the latest model from the Volkswagen factory. After a year, the factory takes the leased car back to be sold, and a new
model is leased. This strategy of leasing cars enables many Volkswagen workers to drive luxury vehicles such as the Jetta 2011.

To consume a “good car,” as I showed in the previous chapter, is more than a symbolic marker of belonging to a social class. It is also symbolic of having attained (or not) the status of “the middle class,” of not being “mediocre” and a “lazy Mexican.” Belonging to the ‘middle class’ in Mexico is based on perception (Cahn 2008:440). Class membership is based on the appearance that one can afford conspicuous consumption of commodities that are deemed to be expensive (Ngai 2003; ODougherty 2002). As anthropologist Carla Freeman (1998) shows, conspicuous consumption goes beyond the appearance of a well-off social position; it also shapes gender identities. In the case of Volkswagen’s workers, consuming the same cars they manufacture expresses a working-class masculinity while simultaneously disassociating themselves from the image of “the lazy Mexican.” It is the masculinity of the hard worker that provides not only basic essentials—the breadwinner—but also luxury items such as a Jetta. Consuming these cars, moreover, underscores the fact that workers at Volkswagen de México have the best-paying jobs not only in the region but also within Mexico. Even though consuming a Jetta 2011 is only possible to the unionized labor force in the highest wage ranks, it reinforces the appearance of belonging to a particular socio-economic stratum, a form of status that is symbolic rather “than economically ‘real’” (Freeman 1998:256).

Workers’ consumption is how the local understanding of “trickle-down economics” works. The money that Volkswagen laborers earn enables a wide range of market exchanges. For example, at the main entrance of Volkswagen de México, where public transport stops to drop or pick up workers, there are independently owned food stands that cater to the workers. During the celebration of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the main entrance to the Volkswagen factory turns into a
market: street vendors sell alcoholic apple cider, leather jackets, counterfeit soccer T-shirts with the VW logo, as well as plastic wallets with an imprinted Beetle and the VW logo.

Supermarkets such as Wal-Mart, vendors in local markets, small family businesses—the store at the corner of the street—and vendors in the “informal economy” all become part of the “we” that benefits from the presence of Volkswagen. The collectivity that “Puebla is Volkswagen” represents is rather large, heterogeneous, and encompasses different positions in relation to capitalist accumulation (Harvey 1996:359). In many cases, people earn a livelihood because of the purchasing power of the Volkswagen workers.

Consumption can be seen as a contemporary version of re-distributing to the collectivity represented by “we” the money that workers earn. As anthropologists have shown, in societies where communal values and obligations shape everyday social relations, earning money and not redistributing it among “el pueblo” (Hill 1995:111) is seen as an act of greediness (Hill 1995; Snodgrass 2003). In Puebla, however, no one would ever think that Volkswagen workers are greedy for not spending their wages. But the emphasis on Volkswagen bringing jobs (and jobs meaning money) illustrates the assumption that through consumption “we all benefit” from Volkswagen in Puebla. Yet, consumption is not a binding relationship. It is a market transaction where equivalents are exchanged, and this exchange is mediated by money (Marx 1990a:162–163). While the purchasing power of workers is considered a sign of economic stability everywhere, the peculiarity of Volkswagen in Puebla is how this exchange is constructed as a binding relation.

Constructing Volkswagen’s workers as the conduits for the “trickle-down economy,” poses a problem that becomes evident when they ask for a wage increase. When this does happen, the workers are described as greedy by the media and people for asking for a wage increase. They are blamed for potentially disrupting and jeopardizing the “we are all
Volkswagen” collectivity. It is at these moments that anti-strike sentiments are articulated in Puebla. When the stability and harmonious whole is threatened, the fragility of the collectivity “we” is exposed. At times of labor unrest, the factory has used the threat of leaving Puebla as a tool to discipline the labor force. Such threats speak of relationships of subjugation (Foucault 1982). The threat of leaving haunts poblanos to this day and it is an integral part of the regimes of affect shaping the car economy in Puebla. Luis’s statement, “If Volkswagen leaves, Puebla loses; my family would leave” illustrates that, although the presence of Volkswagen in Puebla that is articulated in celebratory accounts, the uneven power relations constituting “Puebla is Volkswagen” are not occluded but rather made visible. The threat of leaving is what Michael Taussig calls a “public secret: [a] reconfiguration in which depth becomes surface so as to remain depth” (1999:5).

“Puebla is Volkswagen” is an entangled relationship. It entangles relations of exploitation and subjugation with celebratory descriptions of Volkswagen de México as well as of “jobs” and “benefits.” But the crux of this entanglement is when people like Luis become instrumental in disciplining the labor force. When Luis says, “If Volkswagen leaves, Puebla loses; my family would leave” and “We are all Volkswagen,” while addressing about one-hundred Volkswagen workers, he participates in the factory’s own strategy of intimidation that attempts to ensure a docile labor force.

2.3 Volkswagen in Puebla

Adrian is a retired engineer in his seventies. When I told him that about my fieldwork, he felt compelled to share his opinion on the presence of the factory in Puebla. This is what he said:
When it arrived, *la Volkswagen* was integrated into the lifestyle of the city and made Puebla grow. [The factory] donated money to preserve the city’s monuments and its colonial architecture, which in turn has made Puebla different from places where *la Ford* or *la Chrysler* are located. These cities are industrial and ugly; there is no life in them.

After a short pause he continued: “Yes, land was expropriated but that is *la modernidad.* Volkswagen preserves the architectural colonial heritage and at the same time, it makes Puebla a modern city.” Rationalizing land expropriation as part of *la modernidad* illustrates—similar to the threat of *Volkswagen de México* leaving Puebla that haunts *poblanos*—that the conditions and consequences of the arrival of Volkswagen to Puebla are not a secret. Adrian also speaks of a homogenous whole into which *Volkswagen de México* integrated itself. For Adrian, the factory has created a sense of temporal continuity between “colonialism” and “modernity.” More importantly, the presence of *Volkswagen de México* is not confined to car production but it exceeds the factory grounds.

Today, pedestrians in Puebla’s downtown can see an infinite number of signs on buildings that contain the name of the building, the century of its construction, and the VW logo. Rumor has it that, when UNESCO named Puebla a World Heritage site in 1987, *Volkswagen de México* donated money to restore the city’s colonial architecture that dates back to the 17th century. Although no one knows with certainty whether this was a one-time donation before the UNESCO nomination or whether it happened after 1987, what matters today is that due to this donation, the factory is present in sites far removed from the car economy.
Today, the well-kept colonial architecture of the city, combined with the signs that memorialize Volkswagen’s donations, stand as an example of how the factory has become an integral part of the city. Instead of being destroyed by the car industry, as it is often argued (Lefebvre 2009:237), Volkswagen de México’s donations have enabled the continued experience of the “historic city.” People strolling through downtown Puebla do not experience the sense of discontinuity, rupture, or disjuncture often associated with modernity and modernizing projects (Berman 2010; Harvey 1990), nor do they experience the eerie sensation of walking in cities spatially built to be car cities with long wide boulevards where only a few pedestrians walk among many cars. At the same time, the “historic city” is at times disrupted. While the center of the downtown area – the blocks surrounding the Zócalo – is well-preserved, a few blocks farther away a stroller can only see the carcass of colonial buildings: their inside has been turned into parking lots.

Downtown Puebla is an idealized representation of a colonial past while at the same time bringing a sense of continuity to the city’s past, present, and future. Poblanos such as Adrian are proud of their well-preserved historic center, internationally recognized as an example of a noteworthy form of Baroque architecture, a syncretism of European tastes with indigenous style.
In addition to its donations to preserve the downtown area, for twenty years Volkswagen de México has been a major sponsor of Puebla’s soccer team, Club Puebla La Franja. Local soccer fans wear the T-shirts of the team displaying the VW logo on the front. In line with the logic of Corporate Social Responsibility described above, the factory has also set up a charity program called “A Day for the Future.” This program connects wages and profits that are then donated to orphanages, health treatment centers, education, and occupational therapy. Once a year, workers donate one day’s wage and “the factory doubles the monetary quantity accumulated.” Volkswagen’s sustainability report describes these donations as contributions to the construction of a “dignified and sustainable future.”

In addition to charitable works, the factory organizes running events that draw a large number of people from every social stratum: women, children, men, disabled people, and nuclear families all participate as runners or onlookers. These events are advertised as “la armadora alemana” (the German assembler), reaffirming Volkswagen’s commitment to society by organizing activities that promote a healthy lifestyle and family conviviality (convivencia familiar.) This is not just a running event. Rather, it is a celebration to display the socioeconomic significance of Volkswagen de México and how the presence of the factory goes beyond cars.

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46 The factory has also donated money to restore a kindergarten in Jalapasco, a town close to Puebla where the corporation has testing grounds.
Donations and sporting events expand the imagined collectivity that “Puebla is Volkswagen.” How this collectivity is included is rather different from the example of jobs. The factory is even embedded in the social life of the city through mundane events such as marathons. The factory creates forms of sociality, leisure, and experience removed from day-to-day laboring on the lines and from the materiality of cars.

Although sporting events are not as significant as donations for education or an orphanage in the larger scheme of CSR, these are still symbolic of the presence of Volkswagen in Puebla. Sporting events reinforce the collectivity represented by “Puebla is Volkswagen.”

2.4 The Landscape of Global Car Production: Puebla as a “Giant Maquiladora”

One afternoon I described to Yolanda, a friend from my childhood years, how people kept repeating the slogan, “Puebla is Volkswagen.” In response, she offered her own interpretation:
“Of course (¡claro!)!,” she said with a tone of indignation. “Because Puebla is a giant 
maquiladora.” Although this is a succinct answer, it deserves some unpacking.

Her answer illustrates the coexistence of two cities, of socio-economic formations that
although part of the same whole—Puebla city—are spatially separated into Puebla Baroque and
Puebla as a global site of car production. While spatially separate, these two sides inform and
constitute each other.

Yolanda’s answer furthermore illustrates that car manufacturing and assemblage are not
confined to Volkswagen de México. “Lean production” also takes place outside of the assembly
lines (Markell 1998). Volkswagen de México has outsourced several of its manufacturing
processes to maquiladoras in industrial parks located next the factory or within close proximity.
These suppliers, many of which are peripheral factories of multinational corporations, are located
in a cluster around the factory and on the Puebla-Mexico highway “in a radius up to 40
kilometers” (Juárez Nuñez 2006:14) so they are able to deliver auto-parts that are required
immediately.49 This is how “just-in-time” is achieved spatially and temporally.

Puebla as an epicenter of global car manufacturing coexists with Puebla Baroque. This
coexistence enables the sense of (constructed) continuity that Adrian evokes. While existing in
tandem, these two socioeconomic and spatial formations are spatially separated. When

49 At maquiladoras there is a minimum wage yet the labor force is not unionized, health and safety conditions are not
met, and women make up most of the labor force. If there is an attempt to organize or even to request revisions to
the collective agreement, this is met with repression and massive firings, as was the case of in Flex-N-Gate, a
supplier of Volkswagen de México in 2011 (López 2011). Significantly, at larger factories such as Volkswagen de
México, the labor conditions commonly associated with maquiladoras can also found: there is a large number of
non-unionized workers yet the bulk of the workforce is male.
Volkswagen de México and the infrastructure supporting car manufacturing were built, they were located away from downtown Puebla and the city’s residential areas in the outskirts of the city.\textsuperscript{50}

Any “outskirt” is land. In Puebla, this land has never been uninhabited or un-owned and it has always been highly desirable. To say that Volkswagen de México is located in Puebla obscures the fact that the factory and the industrial parks supporting car manufacturing are located in the municipalities of Cuautlancingo and Coronango, and more specifically in the towns of San Lorenzo, Almecatla; La Trinidad, Sanctorum; and San Francisco, Ocotlán. Nowadays these once outlying towns are no longer on the outskirts of the city, as the city has spread and absorbed them in a continuous process of incorporation due in large part to the car economy. Today, these towns are within Puebla’s metropolitan area (Patiño Tovar 2004).

“Puebla is Volkswagen” erases the ways in which these towns have been absorbed and transformed into an epicenter of global car manufacturing. The presence of Volkswagen has not only created a wide range of socioeconomic relationships, forms of exchange, and forms of labor but it has also produced the space for car manufacturing (Harvey 2001; Lefebvre 2009). The articulation of global flows of capital, development models of import substitution industrialization (ISI) and export-oriented industrialization (EOI), the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and Volkswagen’s shift to “lean production” have produced Puebla as the place and space for global car manufacturing. Producing the space for car manufacturing is the by-product of technologies of time-space compression (Harvey 1990) and interventionist policies such as presidential decrees shaping car production and transnational car production

\textsuperscript{50} This move might be interpreted as the result of “zoning laws” regulating land-use (manufacturing, commercial and residential). Yet, as I will show below and in the next chapter, “zoning laws” are nonexistent or do not really work in Mexico as land-use is always changing and in a place like Puebla there are small factories next to living spaces.
entwined with the vision of transforming Mexico into a global car producer. This spatial production is the result of the interplay between the global and local.

To map out the landscape where Volkswagen de México is located, I often took the long and tedious bus route across the city to the factory and FINSA, the industrial park located next to the factory. From the vantage point of the bus, global car manufacturing materializes in large warehouses with roofs of corrugated iron that house Volkswagen’s suppliers such as Faurecia Sistemas Automotrices de Mexico S.A de C.V., ThyssenKrupp Automotive Systems de Mexico S.A. de C.V., Dong Kwan Ramos S.A. de C.V., and Lagermex. A Holiday Inn equipped to hold business conferences is located close to this area, and although there is a road, there are no sidewalks; the area is dry and dusty. There are some food stands made of metal, displaying Coca Cola logos, and a small automotive garage with rusty cars and two trailers with the words “Johnson Controls” that have either been parked or dumped. These trailers seem out of place not only because they are in what appears to be no-man’s-land but also because Johnson Controls –a supplier of car seats– is located in the industrial park Bralemex (Almecatla), not far from FINSA and Volkswagen de México. The trailers seem to mark the last stop of the bus route since the bus driver tells me to get out. Although there are some people sitting by a food stand, the place feels desolate to me.

Compared to the dusty desolate landscape that surrounds it, Volkswagen de México is strikingly different. Surrounded by a wire fence and covering an area of 300 hectares, the factory houses multiple warehouses, known as naves where workers assemble cars. There are named streets, sidewalks, and traffic lights. People are encouraged to ride a bike to move between

51 Although locally known as Lagermex, in 2013, the factory’s corporate name changed to ThyssenKrupp Materials de Mexico S.A. de C.V.
places. The warehouse where the *vocho* was manufactured has been renamed by Volkswagen’s workers into *La Nave de la Tristeza* (the warehouse of sadness) or *La Nave de la Nostalgia* (the warehouse of nostalgia) and now functions as a storage area for outdated machines. There are several cafeterias which, on special occasions, serve “traditional” Mexican dishes such as *chiles en nogada* (stuffed pepper in walnut sauce). In the tours that *Volkswagen de México* offers, visitors are shown a “green wall,” trees, and a lake “where even Canadian geese arrive in winter.” There is also a new warehouse made of energy-saving materials, *Sector Poniente*, as well as a system that collects rainwater to be used in bathrooms. Each feature is presented as proof of the factory’s commitment to environmental sustainability.

Every day, 22,000 people on average are on the grounds of *Volkswagen de México*; this number includes workers, employees, subcontracted laborers,52 security guards, and employees from multinationals offering services to Volkswagen such as DHL. During the twenty-four hour period, car manufacturing does not stop; there are three rotating shifts to keep up the ceaseless flow of work. Using a Müller Weingarten stamping press, sixty-four different parts are cut each minute for Jettas, Golfs, SportWagens, and the Beetle. Workers, robots, and machines assemble cars quickly. Teams of workers assemble windshields, engines, wipers, or steering wheels in seconds. The combination of workers, the latest technology, and speed have made it possible to manufacture 1,200 cars by the end of the third shift. Within the context of mass standardized industrial production, this large number of manufactured cars is an example of Taylorism’s vision where “the greatest prosperity can exist only as the result of the greatest possible productivity of the men and machines […] when each man and each machine are turning out the largest possible output” (Taylor 1947:12).

52 This includes those who work for Volkswagen de México and those who are subcontracted, see chapter 5.
The desolate landscape, juxtaposed with Volkswagen’s shiny-looking factory that is the epitome of “productivity,” represents the other side of the global car industry. When thinking about landscapes manufactured (and destroyed) by car production, the Motor City in Detroit, Michigan, comes to mind. It has gone from being the heart of car production to a city in ruins. Shuttered factories, an almost empty city center, abandoned homes, and many other traces of destruction are the hallmarks of its 20th-century industrial past. Yet, in Mexico the manufactured landscape of global car production cannot adequately be captured through the image of a ruin. Instead, it is a landscape that is dynamic and full of life and at the same time, destroyed by that life. This place is the product of conjunctures, of global and local interplays, and forms of life constituted by car production and the social relations enabling that production. This landscape, while deeply connected to and shaped by car manufacturing, is also marginal to it. Food stands or the mechanic’s garage are how those excluded from car manufacturing are integrated into the car economy, albeit in different terms: it is not the same to be in the “informal economy” as it is to be a unionized worker. The landscape of 21st century global industrial capitalism is a collage of modes of production, livelihoods, destructions, and desolation entwined with an excess of manufactured commodities—all in the same locale.

2.5 Histories of Arrival

The history of how the space of car manufacturing was produced in Puebla, however, is not a straightforward narrative. In fact, it is not one cohesive story but, rather, four narratives that shed light on how Coronango and Cuautlancingo became today’s epicenters of global car production. Each version is significant on its own since each one illuminates the ways in which transnational capital, local forms of power, and the state’s legal apparatus have coalesced to produce the space
of car manufacturing. Each version gives its own account of land acquisition, thus each one speaks of different histories. I elucidate the four of them in order to shed more light on the presence of Volkswagen in Mexico. The first three accounts are examples of how “the production of historical narratives involves […] an unequal access to the means of such production” (Trouillot 2015:xix). Putting together the four accounts, I foreground the politics that have shaped both written and oral accounts about Volkswagen de México.

The first account appears in a book published by Volkswagen de México – A Never Ending Story (Schreiber 1998). The author writes that by 1965 “when it became evident that the Xalostoc plant [in the state of Mexico] would not have room necessary for future expansion […] construction in Puebla had to be negotiated rapidly” (ibid 92). The book also draws on the memories of how the factory in Puebla came to be, quoting the head of Volkswagen in Mexico at that time, Helmut Barschki: “We found a piece of land in Puebla and bought 568 acres [229 ha.], instead of the proposed 25 [10 ha.]. The price was so low that the fence would turn out to be more expensive than the land had been!” (ibid 97).

The second account comes from the book The People’s Car by historian Bernhard Rieger. According to Rieger, Volkswagen bought 2.5 million square meters of land (250 ha.) from the regional government (2013:265). Although in his account land acquisition is a simple transaction of buying and selling, he also writes that in 1967, campesinos were forced to sell their land for a specific price: 20 cents per square meter (ibid). Rieger does not delve into the ways in which campesinos were forced to sell; but the very word forcing can imply forms of violence, threats, coercion, intimidation, kidnapping, murder, or the deepening of existing socioeconomic divisions. Forcing them to sell the land for 20 cents, Rieger writes, led to a conflict between campesinos and the government of Puebla. Using the correspondence between
Volkswagen’s director in Mexico in 1967, Helmut Barschkis, and a West German embassy official, Rieger traces a report from Barschkis who reported that:

_Campesinos_ on whose former _ejido_ (communal) land VW erected its works threatened open revolt because of the price at which they had been forced to sell their farms. While the land was worth 20 _pesos_ per square meter […] Volkswagen had purchased it from the regional government at a price of three _pesos_ per square meter (ibid). 53

Peasants were not only angry that they were forced to sell their lands, they were also angry because they received only 1% of the land’s market value (ibid). 54 A cable between Barschkis and the head of Volkswagen in West Germany, Heinrich Nordhoff, written in 1967, illustrates how contentious the process of land acquisition had been. In it, “a disappointed” Barschkis wrote that because of “demonstrations local farmers associations planned against the government’s expropriation policies,” Mexican president Díaz Ordaz “who had agreed to officially open the factory in 1967, canceled all scheduled appearances in Puebla” (ibid). 55 The conflict over land

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53 _Ejidos_ are a form of collective social property (Baitenman 2005:381; Fox and Gordillo 1989) as well as “collective entities with legal stature, specific territorial limits, and representative bodies of governance” (Baitenmann 1995 cited in Stephen 1996:76). In this communal plot of land, members have use rights often in the form of an individual plot of land (ibid).

54 I do not have access to this correspondence but it would be interesting to know if the German official used the word _ejido_. Prior to 1992, technically, _ejidos_ could not be sold. Prior to 1993, _ejidos_ could not be sold at market value either (Azuela et al. 2009:537). Rieger also documents that a “left-wing magazine” charged VW with robbery and described it in its headlines “Like the Nazis” (2013:265). I encountered the same accusation made in the 1980s, when _ejido_ and _minifundio_ were expropriated to expand _Volkswagen de México_ and build the industrial park FINSA (see next chapter).

55 It was not only peasants demonstrating but also students and the urban poor. For an overview of the social conflicts and the convoluted socio-political situation during the 1960s and 1970s in Puebla see Pansters (1990).
that Barschkis described in this 1967 cable is missing from his remembrances published in *A Never Ending Story*.

The third version circulates in mainstream media outlets. During a special radio show celebrating 50 years of Volkswagen in Puebla, broadcasted in 2014, the radio host mentioned that the two million square meters (200 ha.) where *Volkswagen de México* is now located once belonged to Puebla’s governor Antonio Nava Castillo (1964–1965) and Rodolfo Budib Name, a wealthy textile entrepreneur of Lebanese origin. In this version of events, Nava Castillo and Budib Name had originally planned to construct an industrial park on this land. Although the mention of Puebla’s governor as the owner of the land was met with the sarcastic comment by the radio host “What a coincidence!,” neither this version nor the other two versions dispute the fact that land was acquired via a market transaction of buying and selling, whether it be between Volkswagen and the government or a transaction between Volkswagen and peasants brokered by the government or between the political elite and peasants and brokered by the government of Puebla.

Where the previous three accounts agree on the manner in which the land was acquired, the fourth documented account debunks the narrative of purchase. Instead, it is an account of the expropriation of *ejido* (a form of social property) and *minifundio* (smallholdings of land for subsistence). In total, there are three documented expropriations that have benefited *Volkswagen de México* and enabled the building of the infrastructure supporting car manufacturing: in 1975, 196 ha. were expropriated from San Lorenzo, Almecatla; in 1982, 86.68 ha. from San Francisco, Ocotlán; and in 1985, 26.52 ha. from La Trinidad, Sanctorum. These towns are located next to each other in two municipalities: Cuautlancingo (Almecatla and Sanctorum) and Coronango (Ocotlán). These expropriations are recorded in and at the time were made public in the official government communication channel *El Periódico Oficial de Estado de Puebla* and the pro-
government newspaper *El Sol de Puebla* (Barbosa Cano 1984; Patiño Tovar 2004:131). When the Mexican government carries out expropriations via a decree, this is made public in its communication channel-*El Diario Oficial.*

Before delving into how expropriations work in Mexico, let me point out that the number of hectares in each of the four accounts do not correspond with one another. In particular, the combined yield of the three documented land expropriations is 309.2 ha., which significantly differs from the three previous narratives. It is difficult to know with certainty why the numbers do not match because there are no official records. However, it is still possible to deduce why there is a discrepancy between the hectares of land mentioned in each of the four accounts by setting the four accounts against each other. This discrepancy could be attributed to a) the 1982 expropriation was in part to build the industrial park FINSA where today Volkswagen has outsourced many manufacturing processes and, b) the factory began manufacturing in 1967; however, the first recorded expropriation occurred in 1975. Recalling the correspondence historian Bernhard Rieger cites between the two German officials, it seems there was an expropriation prior to 1975. In the third account where Nava Castillo sells his land, this could only have been possible during his tenure as Puebla’s governor in 1964–1965.56

It is significant to note that although all four accounts illustrate different truths and omissions, they do not override each other. The four accounts show how strings of economic interests, political and economic power at different levels—local, regional, state, and

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56 His term was only one year because he was ousted. Popular discontent had been brewing for a long time due to a mix of aggressive industrial expansion, land expropriation, authoritarian rule, police repression of the “communists” within Puebla’s public university UAP, and the growing polarization of society that, on the one hand, was due to antagonism against “the communists” and, on the other, was due to conservative Catholic groups. All this erupted when Nava Castillo ordered, via a law sent to Congress, the “pasteurization of locally produced milk [which meant that] small peasants were obliged to deliver their product to a factory soon to be built” (Pansters 1990:118). The governor as well as Budib Name and Cue Merlo (part of Puebla’s bourgeoisie) were among the main shareholders (ibid).
corporation—personal ambitions, Puebla’s oligarchies, power relations characterized by authoritarian rule and modes of subjection and exploitation, as well as the state’s legal apparatus are tangled together in the making of “Puebla is Volkswagen.”

2.6 The Legal Production of Space

In Mexico, expropriation of land is a complex legal procedure and requires intervention by the state’s legal apparatus. To carry out an expropriation, the government must issue a decree that makes a case for útilidad pública (public utility). This legal concept re-categorizes anything that is considered of “public interest.” Expropriation is deemed to satisfy that interest. “Public utility” is closely linked to Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution.

Originally, Article 27 enabled an agrarian reform via land redistribution in the form of an ejido - a form of social property - but in 1992, with the reformation of this article, the legal avenue to transform ejidos into private property was opened (Cornelius and Myhre1998; Foley 1995; Stephen 1996). Besides the creation and destruction of ejidos, this article, broadly speaking, governs the use of natural resources (water and oil), and declares land, subsoil, and water the property of the nation. It also states that any building or real estate (inmuebles, bienes raíces)

57 As part of paving the road to NAFTA, the then president of Mexico, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, modified Article 27.

58 Article 27 is composed of twenty clauses as well as subclauses and paragraphs. Since its inception in 1917, this article has been modified many times: clauses are abrogated, amended, or added. The last modification was in 2016. For an in-depth view of Article 27’s content (and its several modifications) see (http://info4.juridicas.unam.mx/ijure/fed/9/28.htm?s and http://www.diputados.gob.mx/LeyesBiblio/htm/1.htm. For more on this article see chapter 3.
can also be possessed or acquired for public service because they are connected to the land, physically and juridically.\footnote{Article 27 clause VI: “The states and Distrito Federal [Mexico City], and the municipalities of the republic, have full capacity to acquire and possess all bienes y raíces (real state) necessary for the public services” (my translation).}

Regulating these acquisitions, such as monetary compensation granted to those affected by expropriations, is the Law of Expropriation (\textit{Ley de Expropiación}). Lázaro Cárdenas promulgated this law in 1936 and it was first invoked to expropriate large commercial estates and redistribute the land to peons in the form of \textit{ejidos} (Knight 2008:23).\footnote{This was the Laguna Expropriation. Thirty thousand peasants grouped in three hundred \textit{ejidos} received land (Knight 2008:23). For the particular reason the land was distributed in collective \textit{ejidos} instead of parcelled \textit{ejidos}, see Knight (2008).} The Law of Expropriation also stipulates the requirements for a property to be found to be of public interest or for the “benefit of the collectivity.”\footnote{Article 1, clause IX \textit{Ley de Expropiación}} It could be for the construction of schools, hospitals, streets, or the fair distribution of wealth, as well as the perseveration of natural resources and “the creation, development or preservation of a company”—all regarded as \textit{public utility}.\footnote{\textit{Ley de Expropiación} has twenty articles, plus clauses. The clauses of this law have been abrogated, amended, and added. The last modification was in 1993 as a part of NAFTA negotiations (Azuela et al. 2009:537).}

While at first glance this might appear to be a disjointed list (schools, water, and company), historically there has been an expropriation bringing together natural resources, infrastructure (pipes, buildings, machinery, refineries, etc.), and companies: the expropriation or nationalization of the oil industry. In 1938, President Lázaro Cárdenas, using Article 27 and the Law of Expropriation, expropriated the foreign-owned properties of the oil industry since these were found to be of public interest (Keen and Haynes 2004:302).

\textit{Volkswagen de México} and the infrastructure of car manufacturing have been declared to be of “public interest” as “strategic” for “job creation” and “economic growth” (Barbosa Cano 2013).
1984). Yet instead of expropriating Volkswagen de México itself, peasants’ land was
expropriated so that the factory could be expanded and the industrial park FINSA built. Hence,
to create “jobs” and “economic growth,” ejidos and minifundios were re-conceptualized as a raw
resources to build the factory and FINSA. Producing the space for car manufacturing
transformed an agricultural landscape into an industrial landscape and transformed peasant and
agricultural economies into a single industrial standardized car economy.

Ejido land, especially located on outskirts of cities, has never been protected from
expropriation. After the 1940s, when an intensive project of capitalist accumulation and
industrial expansion began (Joseph et al. 2001; Smith 2008), ejidos became a source of supplying
cheap land. The expropriation of ejidos happened for roads and highways as well as “for federal
projects involving the Mexican Petroleum Company (PEMEX), the Federal Electricity
Commission, [and] the Ministry of Public Transport of the Department of Agriculture”
(Baistenman 2011:381). Expropriating ejidos has been a “fundamental instrument of policies to
[re-order] territory” by expanding the urban landscape (Azuela et al., 2009:537). For example, in
Puebla, ejidos have been a “major source of illegal land supply for low income housing” for over
30 years (Jones and Ward 1998:77; Patiño Tovar 2004; Rappo Miguez et al. 2006). In the 1990s,
to create a development program called Angelópolis “to boost the capacity of industries already
settled in Puebla and to attract more investments and more industries to the city” (Cabrera 2008),
a large number of ejidos were expropriated that, at the time, were located in the “urban fringe”
(Jones and Ward 1998:82). 63

63 In 2011, some of the ejidos where part of Angelópolis stands today (Angelópolis is the most expensive mall and an
area where the most posh gated communities are located) were reclaimed by ejidatarios. In 1992, 144 hectares were
expropriated under the rationale of “public utility” to build hospitals and schools. However, after expropriation, the
land was reclassified for residential use and sold to developers for market value to build the elite gated community
La Vista Country Club (Hernandez Alcantara 2011; Murillo and Tirzo 2011). In 2011, ejidatarios reclaimed the land
In Mexico, the agrarian reform that redistributed *ejidos* played an instrumental role in the vision of national integration and the project of economic development. While the agrarian reform began after the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920), it was during the Cárdenas presidency that it received the largest push ever. For Cárdenas, the agrarian reform would “transform rural society and with it the nation” (Knight 2008:19). As historian Alan Knight argues, unlike previous Mexican presidents after the Mexican Revolution, Cárdenas conceived of the *ejido* not as a temporary way station on the road to agrarian capitalism nor as a mere political palliative, but as a key institution which would regenerate the countryside, liberate *campesinos* from exploitation and, given the appropriate backup, promote the development of the nation. [The] *ejido* would be the political training-ground of an educated, class-conscious peasantry (ibid).

While Cárdenas’s project might be described as “Utopian, naïve, and populist [it] certainly cannot be seen as a strategy for industrial development, favoring capitalist accumulation” (ibid). Although land redistribution reproduced the patriarchal relations that structured state-society relations by granting *ejido* rights to the male head of the household (Stephen 1996:291), the *ejido* on the basis that they had been deceived but also because documents signed by then president of Mexico, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, proved that the *ejido* belonged to them.
was defined as “family patrimony.” As such, ejido rights are transferable to spouses and children of ejidatarios (Cornelius 1998:16).

Cardenas’ nationalist vision, as Alan Knight (2008: 19-31) shows, sought to bring together different strands of Mexican society – proletarians from different industries, peasants, peons, Yaqui and Mayo Indians, Maya peons and children – through ejido distributions, the expropriation of industries, and through the rural teacher (maestro rural), whose role exceeded the improvement of basic literacy and numeracy to focus on “help[ing] peasants in the struggle for land and the worker in his quest for the wages fixed by law” (Lerner 1979:114, cited in Knight 2008: 31). It also sought to include Mexican repatriados (repatriates) who worked on cotton farms in Texas and were given land as part of the Mexican government’s ‘colonization’ project in order to create large-scale cotton farming along the Mexico – US border (Walsh 2008). Even though his vision aimed for a patriarchal class-based society, it was more inclusive than both previous and later visions of what Mexico could be.

Although the ejido was meant to be a medium of inclusion, Daniel Nugent and Ana Maria Alonso argue that the ejido was instrumental for state control. The ejido has functioned semantically within what Marx might have called “the ideal historiography” of the Mexican state, its so-called “cultural history” ([1857] 1973:109), to promote a populist revolutionary nationalism that establishes a privileged role for the state as paterfamilias

64 Single women and widows supporting a family were the exception (Stephen 1996).
65 As part of the 1992 reformation of Article 27, the New Agrarian Law defines ejido as “individual private property” (Cornelius and Myhre 1998:16). This redefinition could potentially lead to the loss of authority by spouses and children of ejidatarios over the dispensation of ejido rights” (ibid).
66 By combining “political control with nourishing the collectivity as a social actor [Cárdenas’s project was] a double-edged project” (Levison and Spencer 1999:233). For more on this “double-edge project,” see Knight 1994; Vaughan 1997.
and arbiter of social conflict while eliding relations of domination [and] state control over the peasantry and over agricultural production it has secured (Nugent and Alonso 1994:212–13).  

While the *ejido* has been an instrument of social control and domination (Fox and Gordillo 1989:137), it has also been an instrument of political representation for peasants and a “resource of independent social mobilizations” (ibid). The *ejido* is the kind of entanglement that this dissertation examines: a complex relationship constituted by, and enabling, forms of domination and forms of resistance. 

The double-bind of the *ejido*, however, disappears with expropriation. What also disappears is the vision of collectivity that permeated Cárdenas’s years. While this vision has been undermined since the 1940s, the *ejido* still retained some of its political force. The act of expropriation, furthermore, erodes what the *ejido* (and minifundio) is in terms of its materiality and its use-value. The *ejido* is land, and land is a means to earning and making a livelihood and even if working the land cannot fully provide a livelihood, it can at least supplement it. Expropriating land from Ocotlán, Sanctorum, and Almecatla was a process of primitive accumulation and deprived peasants of a medium to grow food. Along with the land that was dispossessed, ways of being and economies deeply connected to the land were ruptured as well. Declaring *Volkswagen de México* and the infrastructure for car manufacturing to be of “public interest” illustrates the boundaries of the collectivity represented by “Puebla is Volkswagen,” as well as its destructive underpinnings. 

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67 On the ground, land redistribution in the form of *ejidos* was a complicated matter and not everybody benefited from it (Baitenman 2005; Mallon 1994). On the constructed peasant subjectivity that shaped the Agrarian Reform, see Nugent and Alonso 1994.
2.7 Before Volkswagen de México

In 1984, a local anthropologist, Manlio Barbosa Cano, described Ocotlán—one of the three towns affected by expropriation—as a “traditional community like many others in the region” where

Elders speak Nahualt although they cannot be identified as indigenous […] the attachment to the land and to the traditions is very strong; among them there is an elaborate network of social relations, some generated via blood relationship and others via a ritual relationship (compadrazgo) and others via the relationships created by working for the benefit of the community. The social ties and relations that have been created are through work and since the majority work on the land, land plays a key role in the social and economic organization of this community […] the people of [Ocotlán are] the heirs of the indigenous people who have been constantly dispossessed of their land since the conquest [of the Americas], especially when dispossession increased during el Porfiriato during which they were violently forced to work for the hacendados [owners of haciendas and large landed estates] (Barbosa Cano 1984:56; my translation).

In Cuautlancingo and Coronango, land plays a significant role in social relations and in the structural organization of the towns; peasants share the responsibility of communal labor (faena) (ibid. 56) that in many rural towns continues to be common for building roads or the church (Rothstein 2007). Within this social milieu, labor is not an abstract “thing” separated from the
activities of social life, instead, labor is a social practice (Taussig 2010) that creates forms of cooperation and economies of reciprocity.

Land in these towns was fertile and valued because peasants grew food there. Cano describes the quality of the soil as being:

of the best quality with a layer of 50 cm humus$^{68}$; with wetlands (*humedales*), rivers, springs and aquifers where water can be found 7 to 12 meters deep (Barbosa Cano 1984:54, my translation).

Peasants cultivated corn, alfalfa, fava, squash, and black beans. Corn was either consumed in the household or sold at local markets, an economic activity carried out by women. Compared to the high-tech, export-oriented, and mechanized agricultural farming in the northern estates of Mexico (Cornelius and Myhre 1998:8) and even in certain areas north of Puebla (Sierra Norte) (Edelman 1980), the small-scale agricultural production in Almecatla, Sanctorum, and Ocotlán was a “technological backwater” (Cornelius and Myhre 1998:8). Peasants carried out agricultural production using manual labor and oxen, and produced food for subsistence and to feed their cows, sheep, donkeys, and oxen. Since there was no irrigation system, crop cultivation followed the rainy season (*tierra de temporal*) and they used animal manure as fertilizers. In addition to cultivating and farming, peasants produced and sold artisanal brick as a way of supplementing their livelihoods.

$^{68}$ *Humus* is “the organic component of soil, formed by the decomposition of leaves and other plant material by soil microorganism” (Oxford Dictionary).
Even though the socioeconomic life in Ocotlán, Sanctorum, and Almecatla was predominately based on agricultural production and artisanal brick, peasants in these towns, like many others in Mexico, have been integrated into the dynamics of industrial wage labor and capitalist forms of accumulation (Barbosa Cano 1984; Bonfil Batalla 1973; Knight 2008; Warman 1982). In many cases, this has taken place through migratory circuits within Mexico (Edelman 1998) and to the United States (Bonfil Batalla 1973; Cornelius 1998; Gamio 1935; Zendejas and Mummert 1998). As anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil Batalla (1973) argues in his study of Cholula, a town near Cuautlancingo and Coronango, land cultivation has supplemented wages. In a similar way, the economy of peasants from Ocotlán, Sanctorum, and Almecatla included the cash economy, in many cases through wage labor, land cultivation, exchanging labor to cultivate land, and reciprocal social relations, all combined to provide a livelihood.

The expropriation decree describes these economies and socioeconomic relations as not being of “high productivity” (Barbosa Cano 1984:58). This assessment was based on the visual inspection of government inspectors as part of a report written by the Secretary for the Agricultural and Livestock Development. The inspectors visited at a time when there were only fields of corn. The area was described as being of “not high productivity” that needed to be replaced by a productive car economy.  

The argument of “not high productivity” foregrounds two conceptions of ‘productivity’ and ‘time.’ In the argument put forth by the Mexican government, “productivity” does not refer to the ability to produce but to the ability to produce more in less time (using less labor) all year-

Prior to the construction of industrial parks, there was a plan to transform this area into a “green belt” as a mechanism to join the “miracle of the green revolution” (Hellman 1994:121). This project was called “Plan Puebla.” This would have meant large-scale agriculture transforming forms of labor and relations to the land. For Plan Puebla, see Hellman (1994) and Edelman (1998).
round, a form of linear time (Thompson 1967). This conception of “productivity” is aligned to the rhythm of the capitalist mode of production. Today, the epitome of this “productivity” is Volkswagen de México’s manufacture of more than 1,500 cars a day. Capitalist “productivity,” however, is never really achieved. It is always elusive and thus an infinite process. On the other hand, “productivity” as the ability to produce also refers to the quantity produced while following “cyclical time” in relation to the seasons (Evans-Pritchard 1940). Cyclical time shapes “labor rhythms” (Thompson 1967:60) in relation to agricultural production and seasons.

In answering the call for productivity, an industrial landscape replaced fertile soil, cyclical-time, and land cultivation. By the 1990s, linguistic anthropologist Janet Hill described Almecatla, next to Ocotlán, as a place where

the dry-farming lands which once surrounded the town have largely given way to soil erosion, shantytowns, and the spread of industry. From the plaza of Almecatla one looks west to the storage lots of the Puebla Volkswagen plant, the largest factory in Latin America. Nearby to the east and south several plants make products such as glue and chemical fertilizer; fumes from these installations drift continually over the town. While the people of the region value the factories for the wage labor they provided, they consider themselves campesinos (cultivators) (Hill 1995:113).

As Hill’s description illustrates, Volkswagen de México is one of many industries; however, this car factory is the pioneer of an aggressive industrialization program that began in the 1960s (Pansters 1990; Patiño Tovar 2004). The presence of Volkswagen in these towns has also entailed the construction of two industrial parks and hotels, as well as low-income housing where
many of the third-generation workers and employees live. The presence of Volkswagen de México has extended the urban area and the limits of the city.

Today, in Almecatla, Sanctorum, and Ocotlán, not even the “dry-farming lands” that Hill described exist; only a few scattered patches of land here and there are visible. The secretary of the municipal president from Cuautlancingo explained, “There is no more land for cultivation.” Land is now covered by asphalt, cement, concrete, corrugated iron, and steel, in the form of roads, houses, condos, factories, gas stations, and supermarkets. The few patches still visible are in a state of limbo: waiting to either be the foundation of another concrete structure or lie beneath the cement of another road. The largest structure made of the materials of modernity and covering 300 hectares in Almecatla, Sanctorum, and Ocotlán is Volkswagen de México. Land was transformed from being instrumental for livelihoods, a medium of social relations and a place where peasants lived, to a commodity and a raw material to house the third largest car producer in North America and a center of global car production.

### 2.8 After Volkswagen de México

I have seven children, this land is my and my children’s patrimony; our house is also there. If they take my land, how am I going to support my children? Where are we going to live? We are poor but we don’t want money. With the $500 pesos per square meter that they are offering us, we cannot even buy a Volkswagen car! With the money that has
been offered, how many days can we support ourselves? Expropriating the land is foreign people sucking from us the last drop of blood.  

The above quote is from a woman whose land in 1992 (at the time of the recording) was about to be expropriated to expand the factory and to build the industrial park FINSA. The land was hers and her children’s patrimony, it supported them, and provided them a home. Land here is also valued because it exists in a future temporality, and as patrimony, it passes from parent to child and as such is a medium through which to provide a livelihood across generations. Her comment about money is not a demand for more. She rather articulates the incommensurability of exchanging land for money. Money is not like fertile land. It runs out. The consequences of dispossession will be felt for years and generations to come.

Land dispossession highlights the significance of economies constituted through different practices and the significance of the materiality of *ejido* and *minifundio* as land. Land cultivation has for a long time supplemented wages and the combination of these economies has had material effects. In 1982, during one of the hardest economic recessions known as *la crisis*, Volkswagen workers coming from the neighboring state of Tlaxcala whom had land, returned “[to rely on] subsistence production” (Rothstein 2007:60; Benería 1987; González de la Rocha 1991).

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70 For this section, I rely extensively on an article written by local anthropologist Manlio Barbosa Cano (1984) and a video that contains the testimonies of peasants from the last documented land expropriation, locally known as the “Ocotlán expropriation.” See the following chapter for the afterlife of this expropriation.

71 Subsistence production is a form of unpaid labor that is more often carried out by women in the households, thus reproducing the gender dynamics that shape the domestic sphere. I’m aware that suggesting that wage labor combined with land cultivation offers more possibilities of social well-being in times of economic crisis would be a form of supporting—and justifying—the power relations inherent in the “sex/gender system” (Rubin 1975). Yet, having land for subsistence production offers more possibilities than having none. *La crisis* redefined gender
Besides eliminating a source of livelihood and a form of patrimony, dispossessing peasants of their land meant breaking modes of organization, social relations, and communal labor. Land dispossession meant rupturing ways of being and economies. It meant shattering a collectivity deeply connected to the land, labor, festivities, and rituals. Land dispossession meant, as a woman in her sixties stated, “[The arrival of] Volkswagen plucked the life from our hands” (Nos arrancaron la vida de las manos con la Volkswagen).

Without land, peasants have only their labor power to sell. The promise of available jobs that helped justify the expropriation of land rarely materialized. Peasants were rejected because of their “lack of skills needed for industrial work” (Barbosa Cano 1984), or, in the best-case scenarios, they became janitors (Patiño Tovar 2004). Unlike the Enclosure Act during the Industrial Revolution that aimed at transforming farmers into workers for factories (George 1998:x), expropriating land to create the car economy in Puebla did not aim to create a pool of workers. There was already a pool of textile workers that were “lured [because] VW wages [were] at around twice the average local rate” (Rieger 2013:267; see also Schreiber 1998).

The social bonds that were constituted via working the land collectively were not only broken by dispossession. Without land, peasants migrated to either the city or the United States in search of work. Expropriation causes “desarraigo” (Barbosa Cano 1984:56)—the uprooting of people from their place. Today, in Almecatla, Ocotlán, and Sanctorum, many people—older people and children—wear baseball hats from the Chicago Cubs, Angeles Anaheim, New York

relations and household dynamics, as many women joined the ranks of the “informal economy” (Benería 1992; González de la Rocha 1991; Rothstein 2007).
Yankees, Dodgers, and T-shirts with the Old Navy Logo, material representations of the distances their relatives have traveled to find work following dispossession.

Uprooting also affects those left behind and the texture of social life. Today, the main plazas of Ocotlán, Sanctorum, and Almecatla are not the bustling centers that often characterize these places in towns and cities. On a sunny afternoon, instead of children playing, adults engaging in conversation or los novios (non-married couples) hanging out, these places are deserted. Some of the houses surrounding the plazas have graffiti on their walls, a phenomenon usually associated with vandalism and unemployed youths. In Ocotlán, the grocery store located in front of the plaza has bars to prevent people from breaking in. The storekeeper laments that there have been robberies ranging in severity from something as small as stealing a bag of chips to stealing money.

Expropriating land to build the infrastructure of the car economy is a process that singles out and gives priority to a “collectivity.” At first glance “collectivity” is then an empty signifier that builds its referent in relation to place, socio-historical and economic moment, and political project. As this chapter suggests, there has been more than one “collectivity” created and broken by the car economy. Land dispossession illustrates the exclusions, boundaries, and violence shaping the collectivity “Puebla is Volkswagen.”

2.9 Conclusion

“Puebla is Volkswagen” is more than a catchy slogan indicating where Volkswagen de México is located. While erasing the fact that Volkswagen’s car factory is located in the towns that once surrounded the city, at the same time, “Puebla is Volkswagen” allows us to examine how the space and place for manufacturing has been produced by the confluence of flows of capital,
visions of development, and authoritarian rule. More significantly, “Puebla is Volkswagen” is a relationship of entanglements. Dispossession and construction, exclusion and inclusion, violence and production are inseparable sides of the same coin.

Exclusion here refers to peasants whose land was expropriated – a history of expropriation that, although widely documented, is often tamed and contained by how the factory is celebrated for bringing jobs. But exclusion also refers to how workers—at times of labor unrest—are excluded and blamed for putting into jeopardy this collectivity. The threat of leaving Puebla has shaped Volkswagen’s car economy. Threat is a relation of domination and subjection. Dispossession and threat are open secrets that lie at the surface and are at times mentioned as a matter-of-fact. Rather than shattering the collectivity represented by “Puebla is Volkswagen,” these public secrets reinforce it. The threat that the factory could leave Puebla, which haunts this collectivity, is what continuously compels the affirmation, “We are all Volkswagen.”

Dispossession, subjugation and domination as well as forms of exploitation that enable Volkswagen’s continuous presence in Puebla have not been forgotten. They continue into the present as traces of an obscured history about Volkswagen de México. I turn to these traces next.
Chapter 3

3 Traces of Car Manufacturing

At the side of a busy and dusty road that leads to Puebla’s airport and the highway to Mexico City, a celebration for Children’s Day is unfolding. But, unlike most celebrations taking place in Mexico on this Saturday, April 20, 2011, this celebration is also a political act. Tinged with environmental slogans such as “We want more trees and fewer highways,” the celebration is a protest against the recent installation of high-voltage electricity towers along this road. This celebration has been organized by Consejo Regional en Defensa de la Vida y el Medio Ambiente (Regional Council in Defense of Life and Environment) and El Frente de Pueblos por la Tierra y el Agua, region Puebla (People’s Front in Defense of Land and Water, Puebla Region). On a stage is Agustin, a self-described campesino in his seventies and a founding member of El Frente. He addresses the municipal authorities from neighboring towns, activists, and parents but, in particular, the children that are gathered in front of him.

The government is telling us that it is bringing progress to the area. We have heard that tale before when la Volkswagen and la Hylsa came. The area where we are celebrating used to be a place where trees and water were abundant and land was fertile; people could always get a good harvest of corn, beans, squash, and zucchini. We could fish carp and atepolocales, frogs and acociles; we had fresh water coming from different aquifers into
the springs.  

Food was never scarce. Today we have this road and it is dry. With the arrival of those companies, land was expropriated and a campesino killed and [with the subsequent] construction of highways, our landscapes and ways of living have changed. Now, we tend to have the illusion of progress and modernity because we have asphalt roads and factories. If mega-projects are not stopped, in the future, you will end up being the source of cheap labor. So I am going to tell you that we used to live better, when [according to the government] we were worse off.

To help the children imagine landscapes long ago destroyed and the ways of being that were ruptured, Agustin recalls the practice of naming places according to their physical characteristics. He translates from the Mesoamerican language Nahualt the names of the towns where Volkswagen de México, Hylsa, industrial parks, and the maquiladoras that supply to Volkswagen are located: “Coronango means ‘where the river [Atoyac] makes a turn’ and Cuatlancingo means ‘birds’ forest.’” As these names that mirror the landscape suggest, there were lakes, rivers, springs, wetlands, trees and different forms of animal life. He then waves a bunch of papers as proof of how “la Volkswagen consumes 450,000 liters [of water] to manufacture one car.”

Agustin argues that, although people today are “worried about la ecología (the environment) it is not that water is becoming scarce; the problem is how water is used and how much.” An example of this problem is “la Volkswagen: the factory plunders water to produce cars [and cars also] mean asphalt roads which don’t let rainwater go underground. Ironically, [President] Felipe Calderón gives an award for producing lots of cars and for taking care of the

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72 Atepocales and Acociles are the Spanish version of Atepokalt and Acocil, Nahualt terms for ‘tadpole’ and ‘freshwater shrimp’ respectively.

73 Atoyac is the Spanish version of Atoyak; it means “river’s place.”
environment.” The solution to global warming and water scarcity, he says, is “to return land to peasants. The furrows we made to plant corn filter rainwater into the aquifers, refilling rivers of underground water. Thus we [peasants] not only grow food but also help the planet.”

Using Agustin’s critique as a starting point, in this chapter, I examine a counter-narrative to the celebratory representation ‘Puebla is Volkswagen.’ In this narrative, *Volkswagen de México* figures as the quintessential example of “Lo que el capitalismo, la modernidad y el progreso han hecho” (‘what capitalism, modernity and progress have done’). While elucidating this counter-narrative allows me to expose silenced histories—the effects of car manufacturing in Puebla, such as environmental destruction and land and water dispossessions—my aim is to examine how these silenced histories are interpreted and are used to construct two systems of value juxtaposing the before and after of car production. Through this construction, my interlocutors offer a critique of the capitalist mode of production while simultaneously reappraising peasant ways of life. Speaking about the effects of car manufacturing is more than reconstructing and remembering histories of the violence inflicted by the state and transnational capital, deception, destruction of landscapes, water plunder, land dispossession, ruptured economies, and ways of being. These histories are told with particular aims. They circulate in rural towns currently being absorbed by Puebla’s expansion and affected by large state-led and transnational capital-led infrastructural projects, known as megaprojects, and, as such, these histories are a tool of struggle. 

But these histories are also a window to view the future consequences of megaprojects. From silenced histories a heteroglossic form of “ecological politics” has emerged (Goldman 1998) to make claims on land and water. Although “ecological politics” partially resonates with

74 On megaprojects in Mexico see Doane (2004) and Howe et al. (2015)
Marisol de la Cadenas’s “Cosmopolitics” (2010) and there are overlaps, my interlocutors don’t describe land and water are sentient beings. Instead, land and water are mediums to make a livelihood. They are valued in terms of their materiality and what they enable. De la Cadena (2015), moreover, uses “earth” for tierra (which refers to the planet earth) to examine the Quechua people’s relationships with their environment. By contrast, I translate tierra as “land” because my interlocutors partially draw on Mexico’s agrarian and peasants histories to make their claims.

To trace these struggles and claims, I follow a self-described peasant and activist group called El Frente de Pueblos por la Tierra y el Agua, Region Puebla (henceforth El Frente). I begin this chapter by describing the group’s motivations and political goals. I elucidate how el Frente has re-constructed silenced histories involving the presence of Volkswagen in the towns of Almecatla, Sanctorum, and Ocotlán, as well as nearby towns. El Frente uses newspaper clippings, academic articles, government documents, traces of environmental destruction, DVD compilations of peasants’ testimonies, and their own memories as evidence against Volkswagen de México. Written and non-written evidence are presented as affectively charged vehicles of knowledge to contest mega-projects and land and water dispossessions. They are also used to hold accountable regimes of violence and the government. The evidence against Volkswagen de México today has become a chronicle that foretells the destructions, transformations, and ruptures brought on by the state and transnational capital.

Put differently, this chapter offers an examination of the presence of Volkswagen in Mexico from vantage point of the margins of the car economy. The silenced histories on the presence of Volkswagen de México illuminate a pre- and post-history of globalization that is not about ‘global connections.’ Rather, it is a history constituted by endured forms of violence inflicted on bodies, ways of being, and landscapes as well as regimes of affect such as coercion,
deception, and fear. It is a history of primitive accumulation and of dispossessions of land and water. Histories of dispossessions, violence, ruptured ways of being and destruction are intimately entangled with, albeit silenced, by the celebratory account ‘Puebla is Volkswagen.’ These histories are embodied in hollow grounds indicating dried-up lakes, wetlands, springs and aquifers, as well as absent trees. These are material signs in the landscape indicating the destruction brought by Volkswagen’s car economy. They are the traces of car manufacturing “expos[ing] the present but also the limits of official (national) histories” (Napolitano 2015:57). Traces become marked by violence, and in their becoming, they are infused with other histories that are present but also forgotten; in this form, traces unsettle official history (ibid). Traces of car manufacturing unsettle not only the celebratory narrative about the presence of Volkswagen in Mexico but also the celebratory narrative of Mexico as a global car producer. Traces illustrate how dispossessions, violence, destructions, and ruptured peasant economies form the conditions of possibility of Puebla’s car economy.

Significantly, traces are not only spatial but they also have a temporal quality as they offer a window into the past, present, and future of ongoing state-led and transnational capital-led infrastructural projects.

3.1 Resisting the TNC

Prior to Agustin’s intervention at the Children’s Celebration, a theater troop from Mexico City called Los Zurdos (The Left Handed) performed a play about a girl named Coquin struggling against a personification of transnational capital (TNC). The gist of the play is that transnational capital and the Mexican government, in order to build megaprojects, collude together to dispossess peasants of their land and privatize water. The government expropriates fertile land to
build pipelines or *maquiladoras* and the underground water located in that land is given in the form of concessions either to bottled water companies or for use in industrial production. Coquin opposes the expropriation of the land where she lives and the privatization of water on the grounds that “she, her parents and grandparents had lived for many years and cultivated their food [there].” Her opposition to leave this place is met with two options: Either the government uses the military to kick Coquin off the land or she stays and all that she cultivates on the land must be given to TNC.

The play, however, is more than just a reminder of the complicity between transnational capital and the government. It is more than a reminder of how peasants are dispossessed of their land, of how, without land, infrastructural projects cannot materialize, of how water has been turned into a ‘fictitious’ commodity, and of how livelihoods bound to wage labor constitute the method through which labor is made cheap. Instead, the play has a pedagogical aim. After Coquin is faced with the two options, she turns to the children in the audience and asks whether it makes sense that the fruits of her labor should be given to TNC and whether it makes sense to take away her sources of food and the place where her ancestors have lived. The children answer with a loud and emphatic “No!” As the play comes to an end, Coquin emphasizes that “the only option is to organize and defend our land against transnational capital and the government.” Creating a semi-circle, the children –some of whom are now on the stage with the actors-- help Coquin to push TNC off the stage. Coquin ends the pedagogical play by emphasizing the moral lesson of the story: “*Juntos podemos defender la tierra y el agua y nuestro derecho a vivir de ellas*” (“Together we can defend the land and the water and our right to live off them”). To
disseminate Coquin’s teachings, scripts of the play are sold for 10 pesos so schools and community centers can reproduce it locally. Within minutes all copies are sold.\textsuperscript{75}

Although Coquin’s play ends happily and the audience claps and cheers the outcome and the possibilities underlined in the play, Agustin’s intervention is a reminder that stories of land dispossession for infrastructural projects don’t often have happy endings. Land dispossession is a violent act and entails different forms of violence. The example that Agustin gives is an expropriation that occurred more than twenty years ago, an expropriation locally known as “the Ocotlán expropriation.” By using the legal mechanism of “public utility”, the government dispossessed peasants from their land—ejido and minifundio—to expand Volkswagen de México and build an industrial park.\textsuperscript{76}

Like the play, Agustin’s intervention does more than tell histories about dispossession, violence, and destruction. These histories are used as a reminder that the proposed construction of electric towers would repeat “the Ocotlán expropriation.” It would repeat the methods used to dispossess peasants, even murder, and the consequences of dispossession—ruptured ways of being, the destruction of sources of food, disappearance of animal and plant species, and environmental destruction. None of these are contained but rather, have lasting consequences. In the case of the proposed high-voltage electric towers, construction would affect schools, houses, and cultivable land and would result in potential health risks such as increased incidences of leukemia and brain tumors in children. But the other long-term consequence is that the towers—a federal and private investment—open the possibility of declaring 25 meters of land on each

\textsuperscript{75} 10 pesos equal .50 cents of a dollar

\textsuperscript{76} Ejidos are a form of collective, social property (Baitenman 2005:381; Fox and Gordillo 1989), as well as “collective entities with legal stature, specific territorial limits and representative bodies of governance” (Baitenmann 1995 cited in Stephen 1996:76). In this communal plot of land, members have use rights often in the form of an individual plot of land (ibid). Minifundios are small land holdings for subsistence.
side of the towers to be *derecho de vía* (right of way) and of re-categorizing ejidos and *minifundio* as being of “public utility.” If this were to happen, the land could be expropriated for the construction of roads or highways. Prior to Coquin’s play, the children have planted trees along the tower’s planned route to symbolically re-claim the land.

This children’s day celebration is organized by *El Frente de Pueblos por la Tierra y el Agua, Región Puebla*, a group composed of several people who identify as *campesinos* and activists. Yet not all members own or work the land. Most of them live in the towns surrounding Puebla city, many of which have been affected by the roads, highways, malls, gated communities, and factories that have expanded the city into the surrounding towns. *El Frente*, along with other groups, organizes events in Puebla to oppose these kinds of infrastructural projects that are connected to state violence and land dispossession. Besides demonstrations, flyers and social events, *El Frente* runs its own online radio station – *Radio Ayocotzin* – as a tool to disseminate news about how people are resisting infrastructural projects in different areas of Mexico as well as to disseminate customs and traditions from rural towns. While the membership of this group is large, the core members are eight.

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77 To give a sense of this network, let me list some of the organizations. *El Frente* has connections with the group *No Más Sangre*, which has opposed Calderon’s “war on drugs” and the violence that it has unleashed. The group is a sibling organization of *El Frente de Pueblos por la Tierra y el Agua, Atenco* and *El Frente de Pueblos por la Tierra y el Agua, region Malinche*. *El Frente* is also connected to a group of artists known as CAIN (*Colectivo de Arte Independiente*) who graphically represent different struggles happening in Mexico such as land and water dispossession for mining, expansion of the city, as well as the multiple disappearances occurring in Mexico. *El Frente* is also connected to the academic world through an Anthropology PhD candidate from *Universidad Autónoma de Puebla*, and to a professor from *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México*, Octavio Rosas Landa (see below). A few years ago, Juan also attended the popular seminar *Seminario de Subjetividad y Teoría Crítica* (open to anyone) led by John Holloway, Fernando Matamoros and Sergio Tischler – all connected to the Zapatista movement.
Mimi runs the radio station and is a student at *Universidad Iberoamericana, campus Puebla* (UIA). Her grandmother was incarcerated about twenty years ago for opposing the freeway that loops around Puebla city, known as *El Periférico*. Mimi is also Juan’s girlfriend, the main spokesperson and the face of *El Frente*. Doña Gloria is a woman in her fifties and often says “capitalistas drool every time they see a large piece of land.” Although she is less known and visible, most of *El Frente’s* meetings are held at her house. Her grandson Luis is a college student in Anthropology at Puebla’s public university and attends meetings as well as gathers information for the group. Miguel and Ramón also attend meetings although not always the events. During rainy season, they collect grasshoppers and cook them to sell in the market—a common practice in Puebla and Oaxaca. The group is multigenerational, and each member brings to the struggle their own histories and their own way of engagement.

The most visible faces of *El Frente* are Agustin, his brother Chabelo, and Juan. They are the most visible because they are the speakers at events. They were also my main interlocutors during my fieldwork with the group. Agustin avidly collects information from newspapers related to ongoing projects to bring “progress” to rural areas, on genetically modified corn and Mosanto in Mexico. When he speaks at public events, Agustin always describes himself as a peasant who still uses oxen to do furrows on his *ejido*. He has eleven surviving children, many of which are in college at Puebla’s public university. He considers himself “self-sufficient.” His brother, Chabelo sings and plays his guitar at events. He composes songs about social struggles and injustices such as land dispossession, eviction and incarceration—“all at the service of capital.” He injects his songs with a sentiment that denotes indignation and pain “to move [people’s] consciousness.” He lives with his two other unmarried brothers. Chabelo also

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78 UIA is an expensive university; Mimi has a fellowship.
cultivates the *ejido* that was his father’s, prepares herbal medicine to be sold and is a beekeeper. In the 1990s, Agustin and Chabelo ended up in prison for their work opposing the construction of *El Periférico* and a mall called *Angelópolis*. Juan, on the other hand, calls himself a peasant, although he own land. Yet, he is learning to cultivate food. Juan has visited autonomous Zapatista communities in Chiapas. He used to bring coffee from those communities to be sold in Puebla. A few years ago, he created a center called *El Espiral* (the Spiral) where he organized talks about *Zapatismo*.

*El Frente*, like many other groups in Mexico, is involved in “ecological politics.” While the specific struggle of *El Frente* is very particular to Puebla, at the same time, the group’s resistance converges with a wide range of movements that aim at showing the disastrous effects of capitalism in the environment and on the ways of being (Goldman 1998). But their struggle also aims at showing the politics of this destruction, namely the ways in which mega-projects affect peasants and indigenous people. While *El Frente*’s struggle is connected to global struggles, local histories of land movements and larger processes of nation-state formation determine how this struggle is carried out and what it calls for.

### 3.2 The People in “The People’s Front”

Although the literal translation of this group is the People’s Front in Defense of Land and Water, Puebla Region, this translation erases some of the nuances that characterize the group. *El pueblo* in Mexico has a multiplicity of meanings, none of them stable but dependent on socio-historical

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79 Along the loop, there are the most expensive gated communities in perhaps all of Mexico (prices are in dollars), Home Depot, Wal-Mart, and Oxxo, the Mexican convenience store chain. *El periférico* is an infrastructure that has spatially reinforced class distinctions. See Czeglédy 2004) on how roads and highways reinforced segregation spatially in post- Apartheid South Africa.
contexts and processes. The term is also tied to the working class. In that sense, *el pueblo* signals “*positionality in relation to processes of capitalist accumulation*” (Harvey 1996:369; his emphasis). *El pueblo*, as I mentioned in Chapter One, carries class connotations that are erased or neutralized by translating it into ‘the people.’

Yet the meaning of *el pueblo*, as it is used by *El Frente* and, as the group’s struggles indicate, goes beyond positionality and class identity. The group is composed mostly of peasants from different rural towns located at the periphery of Puebla city. Thus, *pueblos* also draws its meaning from another common definition of *pueblo* found in dictionaries: a village, a town, a group of people forming a community. *El Frente* uses *pueblo* in the plural to refer to locality but also to highlight how these towns have been shaped by histories of violence and dispossession for infrastructural projects that expand the city. *El pueblo* is used to identify them as *campesinos* (peasants) even though some members of *El Frente* don’t have what makes a peasant a peasant – land– and many members are from the city. Besides class-based identification, *El Frente* uses ethnic identification by using Nahualt, a Native Mesoamerican language. Both of these converge to make claims on land, water and place.

*Pueblos* then connects people and places in opposition to an ethos of Mexican capitalist modernity materialized by industrialization (state-led and TNC-driven), wage labor, and land dispossession. In Mexico, industrial production has been more than a mechanism of economic development and growth. Industrial production was and continues to be –even in the context of Mexico as a “pluriethnic country” (Speed 2005)\(^80\) – a mechanism that continues with the project of assimilation that has forged “the nation” (Gamio 1916; 1935). While this process is less

\(^{80}\) The Law on Indigenous Rights and Culture was passed by the Mexican Congress in 2001 (Speed 2005). Indigenous people gained legal recognition in 1992 (Saldívar 2014), the same year that the agrarian reform officially ended and the legal venue to privatize *ejido* was opened.
visible in towns that are far from large urban centers and industrial cities, peasants who live next to metropolises such as Puebla are in a constant struggle to protect their land from expropriation. If land is expropriated, economies that include wage labor and land cultivation are destroyed. *El Frente* opposes to the ethos of Mexican capitalist modernity signified by industrialization. As this opposition suggests, the group doesn’t exist outside of the state or capitalism (Eiss 2010; Mallon 1983; Smith 1989). Instead, *El Frente* and its struggle against land and water disposessions, ruptured ways of being, and environmental destruction are all connected to capitalist modes of production, to Mexico’s models of economic development, and to the making of the “mestizo” nation.

In the struggle against Mexico’s capitalist modernity, *el Frente* uses and connects different languages, ideas, visions, and political projects. The group evokes the memory of Emiliano Zapata, a key figure of the Mexican Revolution who fought for agrarian reform. In demonstrations carried out by the group and events opposing infrastructural projects, the slogans attached to Zapata appear in banners and speeches: “Land and Liberty” and “Land belongs to those who work it.” *El Frente* has also appropriated the global languages of the neoliberal multicultural order such as indigenous and tribal rights as well as human rights. Quotes such as “Indigenous people have the right to enjoy the full measure of human rights and fundamental freedoms without hindrance of discrimination” or “indigenous people have the right to decide their priorities for the processes of development” are drawn from Convention 169 (International Labor Organization ILO), not only appear on banners but are then localized as “We demand that the federal, state, and municipal governments respect the right of pueblos to protect their land and natural resources.” *El Frente* also uses information from Greenpeace about global warming or The Stockholm Convention on air pollution. Thus, *El Frente* taps into political struggles that
are at the same time local and global. Recall Agustin, “If you want to cool down the planet return the land to the peasants.”

Despite utilizing a broad array of languages, El Frente’s main source of inspiration and drive for political struggle and change is the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN). This revolutionary group has given a new meaning and political power to indigenous people. As Juan says, prior to the Zapatistas, Indio was used as an insult. El Frente is inspired by Zapatistas’s ideas of autonomy and bottom-up leadership (mandar obedeciendo –to lead by obeying), juntas de buen gobierno –good governance councils organized and run by campesinos and women that promote equal voice to marginalized community members. But the central idea, project, and vision that El Frente draws from Zapatismo is the exercise of the right of self-determination. In the Zapatista case, exercising this right has led to the formation of autonomous communities that live the tenets of zapatismo. The Zapatista idea that “rights exist in their exercise rather than in the wresting from the state” is central to the ELZN’s perspective of their struggle (Speed 2005:41). In this conception, rights are not granted by the state nor are the state’s legal regimes the referent for rights. Instead the right for self-governance is “exercised irrespective of the state’s position” (ibid). To exercise rights, anthropologist Shannon Speed argues, challenges neoliberal multiculturalism and discourses of human rights as these are deployed by the state.

There are differences between El Frente and Zapatistas. To begin with, El Frente is a group composed of peasants from different towns and people from the city; they are not a single bounded community, a significant difference from places that have been able to implement a

81 Another example that Speed gives about exercise is the Subcomandate Marcos’s slogan “We the Zapatistas want to exercise power, not to take it” (2005: 41).
version of self-determination (Sierra 2005; Speed 2005). Members of El Frente live in different towns that are continually threatened by the ongoing expansion of the city and infrastructural projects. In their case, exercising rights is the right to live off land and water. While this right is informed by autochthonous claims on land, it is also infused by the other ways in which El Frente creates its own discourse of ownership and relationship to the land and water. By making claims on water and land as rights and how they make the claim, El Frente destabilizes capitalist accumulation, industrialization, and forms of property—all of which are deeply connected in the making of modern Mexico.

3.3 The Example of Volkswagen

In El Frente’s struggle to oppose large-infrastructural projects, Volkswagen de México is the quintessential example of the consequences of state-led and TNC-led industrialization. Puebla, however, is known to have one of the largest industrial concentrations in Mexico so there are many other industries that can be used as examples of the consequences of infrastructural projects.

In the course of the group’s struggles, El Frente also criticizes other industries. For example, El Frente accuses Ecotérmina of burning toxic waste in incinerators—biological waste, expired medicine, syringes from hospitals, etc. According to the Stockholm Convention, the international agreement regulating the treatment of toxic substances, this method of disposing of toxic substances should be banned internationally. El Frente has also accused a number of industrial parks, industries, and maquiladoras of dumping wastewater, including fertilizers,

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82 Ecotérmina company collects 25 ton of toxic waste everyday. The hospitals are: Hospital General de Puebla, Hospital Betania (among the most expensive in Puebla) and the Hospital de la Universidad Popular Autónoma de Puebla (UPAEP).
through clandestine and illegal drainage systems into the Atoyac and Alseseca rivers, the Tlaloxtoc stream, Acuitlapilco Lake, and the Texcalac dam – important sources of water located within Puebla state and close to the city.  

Accused of drying out springs and aquifers via overconsumption are Big Cola, a soda company owned by the Peruvian transnational Ajegroup; Bonafont, a water bottle company owned by the French transnational Danone; Coca Cola, and PepsiCo. In rallies, flyers, and events, El Frente holds accountable these industries and companies for polluting air and water and for excessive water consumption. Many them are located in low-income neighborhoods and rural areas, which speaks to the “social geography” (Lesser 2016) of pollution.

An ongoing struggle is the dispossession of water from rural towns to serve the needs of the city as well as the expansion of Puebla city through roads, highways, and housing. Highways, roads, and detours continue consolidating what Uruguayan journalist, writer, and novelist Eduardo Galeano (1995) calls “Autocracy: the dictatorship of the automobile.” In addition to their resistance to the proposed high-voltage electric towers, El Frente is currently engaged with opposing a gas pipeline, Gaseoducto Morelos, which connects three states: Morelos, Puebla and Mexico state. For his work fighting this project, Juan was jailed for two years (2013 – 2015) under the charges of “rebellion, attacks on hydraulic infrastructure, and extortion” none of which was ever proven (Bernal 2015). The expansion of the city and the gas pipeline are projects declared to be of “public utility,” thus opening the legal avenue to expropriate land from

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83 The list is extensive. Among the industrial parks it criticizes are Quetzalcoatl, Ixtacuixtl and Huejotzingo, Xalostoc, Puebla 2000 and Resurrección. Among the companies and industries that El Frente also holds accountable are PEMEX, Alumex (steel and glass), Pintumex (paint), and Sabormex (canned food). Alumex was bought by CUPRUM in 2011 and closed its factory in Puebla and moved to Jalisco, Guadalajara. Sabormex produces different canned food brands such as La Sierra, Clemente Jacques, Café Legal, Café Oro, Café Tazza, Café Mexicano, café Mexicano, Enerplex, and Café Internacional.
peasants. Juan’s incarceration illustrates that El Frente’s opposition to infrastructural projects is viewed as a threat by the government and corporations.

In light of this list of examples, the question is why Volkswagen de México is singled out by El Frente as the example of what capitalism does to peasants and to the environment. Although the car economy is a hegemonic economic activity, a lifestyle, and even a form of identification, El Frente is not using the car economy as a rallying point. Moreover, if the struggle of El Frente is against all current megaprojects and the imminent possibility of expropriating ejido and minifundio under the legal mechanism of “public utility” why is it that Volkswagen de México prominently figures as the key evidence of land dispossession, of the complicity between transnational capital and the government, forms of violence against the pueblo, and excessive water consumption, even though, as I noted in the previous chapter, the last documented expropriation happened more than twenty years ago?

There are subtle differences between the list provided above and Volkswagen de México. Historically, the presence of Volkswagen in Puebla is the product of an aggressive regional industrialization project dating back to the 60’s (Pansters 1990; Patiño Tovar 2004). Volkswagen de México is embedded in local and personal histories and within Mexico’s industrial projects and visions of development. The factory has a special place in state narratives of industrialization and development. This was the case in the past, when development meant industrialization and progress as well as in the current moment of global car production, where Volkswagen de México is entwined with the project to situate Mexico not only as a global car producer but also knowledge producer (see Epilogue). Volkswagen de México, as I showed in Chapter Two, holds a special place—almost beloved—, in Puebla. The factory stands for a particular set of values, jobs, a wide range of possibilities, and it is symbolic of the well-being and stability of the city.
Regardless of the multidimensional significance of Volkswagen de México, the value of using the factory as an example by El Frente goes beyond it being a well-known factory and documented case. To begin understanding why this factory figures so centrally in current struggles against megaprojects, it is necessary to elucidate the effects of car manufacturing and the silenced histories that are entwined with the presence of the factory. Together, these become evidence against the factory and also constitute the traces of car manufacturing. While traces of car manufacturing are very much about documenting and telling a counter-narrative of Volkswagen de México, they also foretell the future of ongoing infrastructural projects.

3.4 Chronicle of A Story Foretold

To piece together silenced histories of the presence of Volkswagen in Mexico, El Frente has gathered a wide range of evidence against the factory. This evidence is made of written materials that are mostly publicly available and of sources that exceed the written word. Written and oral materials include Xeroxed copies of academic articles about industrialization in Puebla, an article on the land dispossession required to expand Volkswagen and to build an industrial park locally known as “the Ocotlán Expropriation” (Barbosa Cano 1984), newspaper clippings that name the factory as one of the largest water consumers in Puebla, and a DVD with the testimonies of peasants whose land was expropriated in 1992. Other non-written evidence includes trails of destruction left by capitalist expansion and resource extraction: hollow surfaces indicating desiccated lakes, wetlands, ponds, springs and aquifers, as well as absent trees, all of which embody silenced histories of land and water dispossession, ruptured ways of being, and violence. Memories that speak to how life was prior to the arrival of Volkswagen and of how peasants made their livelihood are also evidence against the factory.
But while these traces are evidence against the factory, they are also sources through which *El Frente* constructs knowledge. In particular, this knowledge concerns the legal mechanism and processes of land expropriation under the rationale of “public utility.” *El Frente* puts this knowledge to work in the group’s current struggles. Traces of car manufacturing are a referent on how peasants were treated during dispossessions and a window into the future consequences of infrastructural projects.

Testimonies of dispossession and the Xeroxed article on “the Ocotlán expropriation” refer to the last documented expropriation decreed in 1982 to expand *Volkswagen de México* and to build the industrial park Finsa. While the article was published in 1984, two years after the expropriation decree was issued, the actual material expropriation occurred between 1991 and 1992. The testimonies on the DVD were recorded at that time. The article is about the moment in which the government decreed expropriation; testimonies are the afterlife of this decree. Stitching both of them together provides us with a chronicle of “the Ocotlán expropriation.”

The significance of the testimonies and the written account is the factual information (dates, number of hectares expropriated), as well as what these illuminate about legal processes of land dispossession once land is declared to be of “public utility.” Testimonies illuminate how, throughout the legal processes, peasants are enveloped in treachery, fear, and deception, and of how land dispossession actually unfolds. The chronicle is an account of forms of violence – physical and legal – and of the “arbitrary character of the law” (Poole 2004:35). The significance of “the Ocotlán expropriation” lies not only in its role as proof of the violence intrinsic to the car economy but also in how its contents are read and interpreted from the vantage point of the present.

The Xeroxed academic article was written in 1984 by a local anthropologist, Manlio Barbosa Cano. It originally appeared in *Critica*, a magazine published by Puebla’s public
university (UAP). The testimonies too are copies of copies. These were originally recorded in BETA then transferred to VHS and later to DVD. These copies of copies suggest how “the Ocotlán expropriation” has been reproduced a number of times, circulated and preserved for later uses. And, so as to continue their reproduction, circulation, and preservation, I too was given a copy of the DVD and of the Xeroxed article by Juan and Agustin to make them my own form of evidence for further reproduction.

In 1982, the government decreed the expropriation of 86, 68, and 35 hectares (from ejido and minifundio land) in the towns of Ocotlán and Sanctorum, both located in the municipality of Cuautlancingo, in order to expand the factory and build an industrial park.84 The decree was issued after peasants rejected the money offered as compensation, $600 pesos per square meter85 and land in a different town under the claim that “it was of bad quality for agriculture” and that “other peasants have the right to it” (Barbosa Cano 1984: 55). To defend their land, the peasants of Ocotlán and Sanctorum used radio and newspapers, and carried out demonstrations in Puebla city and set up roadblocks. Peasants also used the legal mechanism known as Amparo - “to annul, modify or suspend any government action that violates an individual’s guaranteed rights” (Reed et al. 2000:65). The Amparo was granted in 1983, which suspended the expropriation. Yet, in 1991, ignoring the Amparo, the government re-issued the declaration of expropriation.

84 The Sanctorum expropriation materialized in 1985; see Chapter Two. Unlike “the Ocotlán Expropriation,” neither of the two other documented expropriations has an afterlife. In the testimonies contained in the DVD, peasants make reference to it and call “Volkswagen ungrateful” because of the 26.52 hectares from Sanctorum expropriated that year. Based on this expropriation, in the testimonies recorded in the DVD, peasants ask, “Does Mexico have so much land to give away?” (tiene México muchas tierras para regalar?).

85 In 1982, this was US$ 4.
The testimonies on the DVD begin in 1991, a day after the expropriation decree and the threat of dispossession was renewed. Directly affected peasants, peasants living in the area, residents of neighboring towns, and representatives from peasants’ organizations rallied in front of Volkswagen de México to demand that the Amparo be respected as well as to demand a stop to threats of dispossession. The images from the DVD show peasants holding banners that read “la tierra es de quien la trabaja” (The land belongs to those who work it), “la tierra es de los Mexicanos y no de los Nazis” (The land is for Mexicans and not for the Nazis). Interviewed peasants evoke key political figures such as the liberal indigenous president Benito Juárez and his famous maxim “Respect for the rights of others is peace.” These anti-German slogans and the evocation of the prominent figures that shaped modern Mexico illustrate that this expropriation was challenged using the language of nationalism.

Yet, this land expropriation was not exclusively seen as the dispossession of ‘the nation’ for the benefit of a multinational corporation. In her testimony, one woman described dispossession as “Mexicans eating Mexicans.” This vivid image is a reminder that expropriations not only happen via the state legal apparatus but most often, also benefit the political elite and bourgeoisie in Mexico. To recall from the previous chapter, the land that was initially given to Volkswagen to build the factory was expropriated and then sold as “the property” of the then governor of Puebla Nava Castillo and the textile entrepreneur Rodolfo Budib Name.

The material dispossession of the land took place five months after the expropriation decree had been renewed. On March 3, 1992, a police squad of about three hundred officers with dogs enclosed the land. Industrial machines with the logo of VW also arrived on site. Since many

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86 The DVD lasts fifty-six minutes and 25 seconds.
87 He was president of Mexico for five terms: 1858-1861 as interim and as constitutional president 1861-1865, 1865-1867, 1867-1871, and 1871-1872.
peasants, women and men, were laboring in the fields, the police began dragging them out to the road and, with guns in hand, threatened to kill them if they resisted. Dogs were unleashed to hunt down peasants who ran while cans of tear gas were thrown at them. Neither the people who were laboring in the fields nor those who came to help escaped the dogs’ attacks and police beatings with truncheons and clubs. Peasants were dragged, some by their hair, into police trucks and thrown out onto the road.

The violence, however, was not only physical. Peasants were also subjected to verbal abuse and violence. Once in the trucks, the public security chief of the governor of Puebla, Mariano Piña Olaya (1987-1993), known in Puebla as the (infamous) comandante Verdín,/slapped women’s and men’s faces while yelling at them that “they [campesinos] are huarachudos [people who wear sandals, an item associated with indigenous people], piojosos [which literally means to have lice but in this context is a pejorative to call peasants worthless], roñosos (dirty, filthy); that instead of slowing down progress [and] industries they should be in their houses lavándose los huevos [which literally means washing eggs but, in this context, is a vulgar expression that means ‘to wash up genitals’].” Verbal and physical violence didn’t end

88 José Ventura Rodríguez Verdín is known in Puebla to be the right arm of the most repressive government in Puebla. He has orchestrated several violent dispossessions of land and buildings, violently removing vendors from the streets (vendedores ambulantes) as well as violent repression against any opposition movement. At the time of “the Ocotlán expropriation,” there was the rumor that he controlled the small planes carrying drugs that landed on the highway to Puebla’s airport and in the area of Valsequillo - Tecali. The drug lord Rafael Caro Quintero named Verdín as one of his agents in his payroll (Nexos 2006). Yet, he is still around. Under the current government of Moreno Valle, he was director of “Political Analysis” but was then transferred to the Ministry of the Municipal Government (Secretaría de Gobernación Municipal) to deal with the leaders of the different organizations of people in the informal economy (vendedores ambulantes). Rodríguez Verdín is behind the criminal accusation against Juan because of El Frente’s opposition to the Morelos pipeline (García 2014).

89 After the raid, peasants were taken to the attorney general’s office, Procuraduría General de Justicia. There, they were locked up, ordered to wash away the blood and given clean clothes. Two nurses came and gave them painkillers (prodolina) and sutured open wounds without anesthesia. In their re-tellings of what happened in this place, peasants point out the logic of washing away blood: to appear clean as “if the police has not done anything to us.” By midnight, peasants were released through the back door to avoid being seen by journalists who were waiting at the main entrance. In the DVD, testimonies are not only given verbally; peasants also show their beaten bodies. Dog
here. Peasants were taken to the attorney general’s office (Procuraduría General de Justicia) where they were locked up for hours and continually insulted.

In this violent event and commotion, an elderly campesino was killed. His name was Sebastián García Arce. Neither the people who were interviewed for their testimonies nor anyone from el Frente today knows how and when he died. It isn’t clear if he died because a tear gas can hit him or by dog bites and police beatings or after he was thrown in the truck or at the police building. But what is known, remembered, and circulated at events opposing infrastructural projects is that a campesino died when the government and la Volkswagen dispossessed peasants from Ocotlán of their land.

Degradation and torture, blood and subjugation, death and terror are the conditions of possibility of today’s car economy. The forms of violence that peasants were subjected to in order to dispossess them of their land are a reminder and a continuation of histories of the subjugation of indigenous people, not only to extract labor but also to dispossess them of their lands and water (Lipsett-Rivera 1999). While labor extraction as well as land and water dispossession are linked to capital accumulation, Michael Taussig argues that “terror and torture do not derive only from market pressure” (1984:479). Since colonial times, the Indio—a racial category created to mark racial difference—was constructed as inferior and relegated to a subordinate status (Bonfil Batalla 1996; Saldaña-Portillo 2016). Up to this day, this construction continues to be pervasive in Mexico. Yet, “the social constructedness of ‘race’ [is inseparable

bites and marks left by truncheons on arms, legs and backs are exposed to the cameras. Others show their ribcages and arms in caskets. Women take their long black and grey braided hair with their hands and pull it to reenact how police dragged them through the fields. A woman says, “we are not going to give our land to the government; if they want to kill us, so let it be.”
from the] **social fact** of race,” i.e., the inescapable human consequences of race for the individual in a racist society (Biolsi 2004:400; italics in original). The construction of peasants and indigenous people as dirty and as impeding progress was also the rationale for instilling terror and violence. It is at such moments that the racism that pervades Mexico systemically and socially becomes visible (Saldivar 2014). Expropriating land from peasants and indigenous people is the continuation of a long history of violent and racialized dispossession.

The car economy means the displacement of peasant indigenous people. Hence, the car economy in Puebla cannot be seen only as an economic question. It is also political. Land dispossession to build the car economy is entwined with histories of racism and discrimination. *Volkswagen de México* and the car economy that it represents have been built upon regimes of fear, violence and subjugation.

### 3.5 The Temporality of Expropriation

In political rallies, flyers, and conversations, *El Frente* cites certain facts about the “The Ocotlán expropriation.” The murder of a peasant is what most figured in the group’s accounts. Yet, the article “The Ocotlán expropriation” and the testimonies are also used as a chronicle that foretells what happens when a decree declares something to be of “public utility.” No matter if it is land or infrastructure that is declared to be of “public utility,” the consequence is always the same: land is expropriated. But in this chronicle it is not only the facts and how they are read that is important. The temporal quality of this expropriation, –how long it lasted from the day the expropriation decree was made public (1982) to the day peasants were violently dispossessed (1992)– is meaningful and illuminates what it means to deal with the government. For Juan “once the government lays eyes on your land, it gives them *mal de ojo* (the evil eye).”
There is no spell against the witchcraft of the state. Ten years had passed between the expropriation decree and the material dispossession of the land. Dispossession was also unexpected after the expropriation decree was legally annulled in 1983. However, neither time nor the law made the threat of dispossession to go away. This temporal gap is today interpreted as a “tactic” that the government uses “to confuse people.” Dealing with the government, Juan argues is “like telarañas” (spider webs), not in the metaphorical sense of feeling trapped but in the sense that there are always many threads of information on any issue, procedures, and legal mechanisms that often contradict or override each other.

The deception that permeated “the Ocotlán expropriation” and that the peasants were subjected to is not only related to the refusal to recognize the annulment of the expropriation decree. Deception also emerges from another layer of information and highlights how El Frente interprets and uses “the Ocotlán Expropriation” in the present. The last scene on the DVD is not from 1992 but from 2007. It is a slide that reads: “the facts dated from 1991 so the [compensation] offered by the government] precedes the taking of three ceros to the peso in 1993.” To illustrate how devaluation affected the compensation given to peasants from Ocotlán, the slide shows a table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1991</th>
<th>2007</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$5,000,000</td>
<td>$5,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>per hectare</td>
<td>$500</td>
<td>.50 cents per square meter</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the vantage point of 2007, the last slide suggests that peasants were not only dispossessed of their land but were also cheated in the monetary value offered as compensation. The $500 pesos per square meter were given three months before the peso was devaluated via a presidential decree on June 22, 1992 and made effective on January 1, 1993. Juan argues that the forthcoming devaluation was a known fact when the compensation was offered.
I find myself caught in the same mode of thinking when I see this slide and “the Ocotlán expropriation” from the vantage point of 2017. Within the context of economic restructuring that opened the legal foundations for the privatization of ejidos (Foley 1995), and in 1993 as part of preparing the path towards NAFTA, the Law of Expropriation (1936) was also modified. Compensation would now be based on the market value of the item expropriated. This means that peasants would have received a higher monetary value in compensation for their land. Yet, rather than discerning the soundness of our speculative hypothesis, what is certain is that, once devaluation became effective, the .50 cents offered per square meter were barely enough to buy a chicle motita, a popular chewing gum in Mexico at the time.

3.6 Water Dispossession

Xeroxed academic articles, newspaper clippings, testimonies, trails of destruction, and memories are about how life was prior to the arrival of Volkswagen and they have a social life. Each of these forms of evidence are evoked in speeches at events opposing infrastructural projects, rallies in Puebla city’s main plaza, el Zócalo, in discussions with other activists and members of el Frente, and in flyers distributed at events. The contents are weaved in with quotes from Greenpeace, The Stockholm Convention, Human Rights discourses, Convention 169, Emiliano Zapata, and the Zapatistas.

Newspapers clippings are also displayed at events and are waved in front of audiences. They are evidence against Volkswagen de México, as if the written word backs up and supports the spoken word. The oldest clipping is from 2009 and appeared in the local newspaper La Jornada de Oriente. In it, Volkswagen de México is held accountable for consuming 450,000 liters of water to manufacture one car (Enciso L. 2009) and is named along with Hylsa (a steel
factory) and a pig farm (Granjas Carrol) to be among the largest consumers of water in the country (Puga Martínez 2010). Most of the clippings cite a professor in the Economics Department, from Universidad Nacional Autonoma de México, Mexico’s most important public university, Octavio Rosas Landa who in turn cites the book Blue Gold: The Battle Against Corporate Theft of World Waters (Barlow 2002) and the Polaris Institute in Canada. Excessive industrial water consumption, Rosas Landa argues, has created “the biggest hydro-crisis in history” (Enciso 2009).

Rosas Landa is not only a source of information but he is also part of El Frente’s activist network and attends some of the events that the group organizes. Besides being a university professor, he plays an organizing role with the Asamblea Nacional de Afectados Ambientales (The Assembly of Environmentally Affected Peoples) and the Mexican chapter of Permanent Peoples’ Tribunal (Patterson 2014). He is involved in the current struggle against a new law called “Right to Water” which recognizes water as a human right. Yet, how this right is fulfilled is contentious. It aims at transferring large bulks of water through dams and aqueducts to water-intensive industries such as the automotive industry, avocado production for exportation, aerospace, etc. As these uses of water indicate, it is not for people or small-scale agricultural production. Since “water transfer” is categorized as a “human right” anyone opposing it can be accused of violating a “human right” (ibid).  

Rosas Landa claims that Germans have the best and most accurate maps of Mexico’s underground aquifers. In 2011, at an event organized by El Frente’s sibling group, El Frente de Pueblos por la Tierra y el Agua, Region Malinche, he explained that where the factory is located

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90 An example of how water transfers would work is the construction of the Zapotillo dam—opposed by the Blue Planet Project. The dam is intended to transfer water to the automotive industry in Leon, Guanajuato (Patterson 2014).
has less to do with the popular understanding of geographical location—Puebla is close to Mexico City and to the Pacific and the Gulf of Mexico and Puebla’s highways. Instead, access to water was determinant in building the factory where it is today: the melted water coming from the volcanoes Popocaltépetl and Malinche feeds the underground rivers located in the towns of Almecatla, Ocotlán, and Sanctorum.

The role of water in constructing the factory where it is today is also documented in the book *A Never Ending Story* (Schreiber 1998). It recounts how *Volkswagen de México* came to Puebla from the vantage point of the factory. In 1965, the story goes, when the construction of the factory began, Germans had doubts about finding “water of sufficient quantity and quality on a property of more than 554 acres [224.20 hectare]” (ibid: 92). Geologists perforated without results. The first director of *Volkswagen de México*, Hans Barschkis, called a German expert who was living in Puebla. With his “divination rod” in hand, he located spots where water could be found at a depth of 262 feet (approximately 80 meters). In 2014, in a radio show broadcasted to celebrate the fifty-year anniversary of Volkswagen in Puebla, the radio host told listeners “If water couldn’t be found, the Germans were ready to build the factory in a different place.”

Rosas Landa’s assertion and Volkswagen’s story about finding water seem to suggest that access to water—and not land—was the rationale behind land expropriation. This, however, is not the case. Land, as I showed in the previous chapter, was the raw material needed to build the factory. In the expropriation decrees, land is expropriated under the rationale of “public utility” to expand the factory and for the creation of jobs. Pointing out the significant role that water has

91 The book features the same text in English, Spanish, and German.
92 His name was Kurt Feldmann (Schreiber 1998: 94).
93 During my fieldwork, members of the Rotary Club in Xalapa, Veracruz explained that in the 60s, Volkswagen was supposed to build the factory in Xalapa—a coffee region, with a humid climate and numerous sources of water.
had in Volkswagen’s car economy and more broadly in industrial production expands the scope of Marx’s concept of primitive accumulation. Similar to the expropriation of land to build Volkswagen de México and the infrastructure of the car economy, extracting water from peasants’ livelihoods and economies means, paraphrasing Casey Walsh, the shifting of water from peasant uses to the car economy (2015:12). Water dispossession means the disruption of livelihoods.

3.7 Water: A Fictitious Commodity

El Frente describes the 450,000 liters of water required to manufacture one car as “neoliberal destruction.” This description erases the fact that in Puebla, water has long been a contentious resource. Even prior to the onset of industrialization, water had been a wasted and polluted resource. In Puebla, during colonial times, agricultural production of wheat for exportation was the economic backbone of New Spain (Lipsett-Rivera 1999), but it was also home to industries requiring large quantities of water to manufacture commodities. Glass and textile factories (obrajes) as well as wind and water mills (batânes) for the production of flour, cloth, and cotton were located along the Atoyac and Alseseca rivers. In the 19th century, Puebla was considered the “cradle of the Mexican textile industry” when the first automatic picker spindles were installed in the factory La Constancia Mexicana (Bonfil Batalla 1973:24). By the 1970’s, Puebla was described as a place with “the highest industrial concentration in [Mexico:] automotive, steel, chemical, and textile industries” (ibid: 25). The longstanding presence of industries that require a lot of water for manufacturing raises the question of what is ‘neoliberal’ about this destruction.
Yet, the characterization of Volkswagen’s excessive water consumption as “neoliberal destruction,” highlights the differences between car production prior to the 1980s and after the economic liberalization beginning in that decade which has been cemented by NAFTA and eleven other trade agreements. The shift from import substitution industrialization (ISI) to export oriented industrialization (EOI) in relation to car manufacturing, –a shift to “integrate Mexico into the international markets” (Bueno 1998:258),– meant the elimination of trade barriers and the transformation of the triadic social contract between unionized laborers, Volkswagen de México, and the state (see Chapter Four). NAFTA paved the road to transform Mexico into a hub for global car production.

Meanwhile, the Volkswagen Consortium was also transformed. It went from a centralized multinational corporation with peripheral factories manufacturing cars with technologies considered outdated in Western Europe (Rieger 2013:273) to a transnational car manufacturer (Juarez Nuñez 2005; Pries 1990). For Volkswagen de México, the internal transformation of the Volkswagen Consortium in conjuncture with NAFTA meant that the Puebla factory would stop manufacturing outdated car models for the Central American and domestic markets and instead would start manufacturing new car models for the United States, Canada, and Europe.

NAFTA and the transformation of Volkswagen de México into a global car producer have meant an increase in the number of cars manufactured annually. In 1968, 23,309 cars were manufactured; in 1992, 188,500; in 2000, 425,700 (Rieger 2013:263, 274). The statistics that the Mexican Association of the Automotive Industry (AMIA) gathers show that between January
and March 2015, Volkswagen de México manufactured 123,174 cars.\textsuperscript{94} Increased car production also increases water consumption for car manufacturing. According to the IFAI, the government institution that makes information transparent, Volkswagen de México has also increased its annual water consumption. It went from 1,415,850 cubic meters in 1996 to 2,495,140 cubic meters in 2009.\textsuperscript{95} According to Volkswagen de México, water is used to cool down robots and machinery and comes from a lagoon that captures rainwater: “robots drink lagoons of water” (Wolfcale 2014).

Under its concession, Volkswagen de México has eight wells “to exploit, use, or take advantage of national underground waters” (IFAI). Yet, Andres Barreda Marin, a member of the Assembly of Environmentally Affected Peoples, argues that within the three hundred hectares owned by Volkswagen de México, there are “20 gigantic wheels to extract water” (Rudiño 2014).

Water pollution and excessive consumption characterized as “neoliberal destruction” also points to different conceptions of water and two similar systems of water governance at different times. According to Sonya Lipsett-Rivera, at the time of the Conquest, “Indians and Iberians […] believed that water was a communal resource” (1999:12). In pre-Hispanic and colonial times, the system of water governance was decentralized. It changed by the eighteenth century: water became a centralized resource and its access privatized (ibid; Walsh 2015). Yet by the 1980s, the system of water governance was (again) decentralized, a process that culminated under the

\textsuperscript{94} This number changes every year depending on sales. For example, in August 2012, the factory and newspapers were boasting that “three cars were produced every two minutes [so between] January and August 403,170 cars were produced [of which] 352,192 were exported” (\textit{Atraccion 360}). Between January and March 2016 –after the Volkswagen’s global emission scandal-, 92,220 were manufactured (AMIA).

\textsuperscript{95} There are no numbers prior to 1996 nor for after 2009.
Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994) (Browning-Aiken 2012). The pumping wheels that Volkswagen de México has under its concession follow this logic of decentralization.

As the example of the water system of governance in pre-Hispanic times suggests, decentralization cannot be viewed solely as a neoliberal transformation. Yet, the decentralization of water that began in the eighties was in tandem with the neoliberal transformations in Mexico that culminated in NAFTA. Thus, decentralization today needs to be understood in tandem with how water has been re-categorized as ‘property’ since the 18th century but also with how international trade agreements have re-categorized water as a “tradable commodity by classifying it as a commercial ‘good,’ a ‘service,’ and an ‘investment’” (Barlow 2002:97). Under this definition, governments “are signing away their control over domestic water supplies to international agreements [and trade institutions such as the World Trade Organization to] give transnational corporations unprecedented access to the fresh water of signatory countries” (ibid: xiii), including bottle and/or soda companies as well as cars and computer manufacturers (ibid). Water for industrial production “claims 20 to 25 percent of the world’s fresh water supplies” in the so-called Third World where more than eight hundred free trade zones are located (ibid: 7).

Water for industrial production continues to reproduce the social geography of exploitation not only in terms of labor but also the extraction of resources. “Neoliberal” then highlights how water has been transformed into a “fictitious commodity” (Polanyi 1944) infused with market value, tradable and regulated by the “market” and at the same time a “human right”

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96 For a nuanced description of the neoliberal reforms regarding agricultural use of water in Mexico see Browning-Aiken (2012).
that paradoxically is transferred to industries. As a commodity and for industries, water has been abstracted from the social and vital role it plays in livelihoods.

### 3.8 The Trees That Are No Longer

Standing in a vast green field, Chabelo recounts how he and his brother Agustin, when kids, used to gather fruit from trees. Today, the trees are gone. Their absence transports the brothers back to a different place in time. It is a time when people rested or played under the trees or picked pears, plums, apples, peaches, and apricots. The trees offered fruits to eat, shade on hot days, and the possibility of making some extra money by helping to load fruits onto the many trucks that came to pick them up. While fifty years ago one’s gaze would have fallen upon these trees, today—and under a blasting mid-day sun—our eyes meet a shining silver line. This is la Hylsa which, back in the days when Volkswagen began manufacturing, provided steel sheets to the factory. Arriving in 1968 to cater to the auto-industry, la Hylsa was at that time held up as an example how car-production was creating a network of connected Mexican industries, thus industrializing and modernizing the country.97

We are at least one kilometer away from the steel factory, in a town called San Lucas, Nextetelco on the municipality of Juan C. Bonilla.98 Despite the distance, the fumes coming from Hylsa began burning and slowly killing the trees. As the brothers recount this past, they are looking towards a huge tract of land where trees used to be, as if re-witnessing their slow death.

97 Hylsa was a Mexican-owned company (*Hojalata y Lámina S.A.*) owned by the family Sada Murgueza and Sada Garza) from Monterrey, Mexico and founded in 1942. The factory mined iron in its own mines (on the relationship between Sada Garza and workers as well as labor conflicts in the steel factory see Snodgrass (2003)). Today, Hylsa belongs to the international consortium Ternium and has neoliberalized labor in the form of flexible workers and outsourcing. The current steel supplier for Volkswagen is Lagermex.

98 Juan C. Bonilla is east of Puebla city, northeast of San Pedro, Cholula and east of Coronango (the municipality where *Volkswagen de México* is located).
Traces of destruction connected to car manufacturing are even more visible in Coronango and Cuautlancingo where *Volkswagen de México* is located. Today, cement, asphalt, factories, and houses have covered these traces, indicating destruction over destruction. Only one lake from Ocotlán is still there. However, it was also expropriated and is now showcased during Volkswagen’s tours as an example of the factory’s “commitment to nature.”

At the events organized by *El Frente* to oppose megaprojects, Agustin, when describing the effects of car manufacturing, not only gives numbers, waves newspaper clippings, or talks about his childhood years. He also exhorts people to “go and see for themselves” the environmental destruction in his town San Lucas, Nextetelco. This destruction is the consequence of car manufacturing but also serves as a form of evidence and warning.

Burned fruit trees, hollow surfaces indicating a dried lake, ponds, rivers, and wetlands as well as dry springs, indicating dry aquifers are described and evoked as the destruction caused by car manufacturing. Absent trees and hollow surfaces are not only a referent of what was physically there but also serve as mnemonic devices that recall how life used to be prior to the arrival of *Volkswagen de México*. Memories of ways of being, of livelihoods and economies deeply connected to the landscape are evidence of the dislocation and rupture brought by car manufacturing monoculture.

Memories are about life prior to *Volkswagen de México*. They are about how people used to get a good harvest of corn, beans, squash, and zucchini “without the help of heavy machinery, only using a yoke and oxen.” Or how people could fish “by putting the bucket in the right position” or “drink water without buying bottled water.” In lakes and ponds, people used to cool down or spend spare time. Even people from the city came.

With the advent of *Volkswagen de México*, a series of transformations began. Trees, sources of water, land, modes of leisure, and ways of making a living are today gone. This
destruction meant ruptured ways of being and modes of relationality; land being a medium of social relations, as when celebrations of rituals brought together people from towns in localized annual festivals and religious ceremonies based on place.

These transformations are most visible in the towns of Ocotlán, Almecatla, and Sanctorum, where the factory and industrial parks supplying the factory are located. *El Frente* describes robberies, vandalism, and drug addiction as the effects of the presence of *Volkswagen de México*. Juan argues that when people work in factories rather than the land, the repetitive work and the wage economy render people “individualized” and “they stop seeing themselves as part of the community.” Disconnection from working the land and wage-only relations brought about the social ills that to Juan characterize and plague the city: disunity, individualism, impersonal relations, robberies, drug addiction, and crime. But the other effect that Juan describes and that is a key theme at rallies is migration. People who either can’t or won’t find a job at the factory prefer to migrate, especially if there is already a family member or someone from the same town living in the United States. Rituals and working the land together are intrinsic in regenerating and reproducing social bonds. When people migrate, the connection is not lost; yet the sociality that gives texture to social relations is gone.

At events opposing infrastructural projects, *El Frente* juxtaposes the before and after of *Volkswagen de México*. The description of how life was prior to the arrival of the factory and how it changed might bring to mind the idealization of small town life (*Gemeinschaft*) versus the city (*Gesellschaft*). Yet, rather than dismiss these descriptions as idealizations, the juxtaposition suggests the system of values shaping *El Frente*’s narrative and struggle against state- and TNC-led infrastructural projects. On the one hand is their portrayal of “peasant life”, characterized by community, livelihood and social relations deeply connected to land and water, collective work, and the production of use-value, and on the other hand is *Volkswagen de México* as the example
of capitalism characterized by individual work on the assembly line, wage labor, disunity, as well as water and land as raw material to enable car production, and broken social bonds. While there is a degree of romanticization in the construction and representation of ‘peasant life,’ at the same time this construction brings to light the predatory practices of Volkswagen’s car economy in Puebla and their material effects in the life of peasants: land and water dispossession have caused social dislocation and the breaking of social bonds.

Anthropologists have examined how people make sense of transformations connected to capitalism, and, in particular, to wage labor and accumulation (Hill 1995; Snodgrass 2002; Taussig 2010). In doing so, they have illuminated systems of opposing values and how that opposition is represented. Michael Taussig (2010) shows how individual gain, the subordination of persons to things and the objectification of labor which is made commensurable with money, were represented through the figure of the devil – a symbol not only of the destruction and pain from plantations and mines but also of how the principle of reciprocity is distorted: “the devil as the mediator of the clash between [use-value system and exchange-value] two very different systems of production and exchange” (ibid: 37).

In Mexico and, in particular, in the town of Almecatla where Volkswagen de México is located, linguistic anthropologist Jane Hill (1995) examined this opposition using a monologue given by a dying peasant, Don Gabriel (see also Keane 2016:143–148). Don Gabriel’s son was murdered because villagers saw him as betraying the local values of the town (reciprocity, commensality, community, respect, subsistence agriculture, the values of pueblo) for those of the city (individuality, private profit, competitiveness, saving money) after taking a job as treasurer at a local bus station. Don Gabriel uses mostly Nahualt but when he uses words such as “savings” or “surplus”, he switches to Spanish –ahorro and sobra. Opposite systems of values, however, are not only represented by the languages that Don Gabriel uses; these are also
represented in the “moral geography of the narrative” (Hill 1995:111). Almecatla is the place of community, where el pueblo resides and cultivates land; it represents safety and order. Puebla city, on the other hand, is the periphery, the place of uncultivated land, where the values associated with capitalism –individualism, savings, and accumulation– shape people’s lives. They represent danger, disorder, and the devil.99

*El Frente* has its own devil. Although the devil allegory or pacts with the devil are not mentioned, *El Frente* works with a similar binary to illustrate the perils and destructions connected to infrastructural projects: Volkswagen de México stands as the example of capitalism and is juxtaposed with “peasant life.” This binary is not about making sense of transformations nor is it meant only as a critique of wage labor. To recall, all the members of *El Frente* are involved in the cash economy –even through sporadic wage labor- and Juan comes from the city. Thus, this binary is instrumental to illustrate two value systems.

### 3.9 Incommensurable Values

By juxtaposing “peasant life” and “the car economy,” *El Frente* illustrates two conceptions of value ascribed to land and water and the incommensurability of exchanging land for money. To illustrate, let me point out that the story of “what was there” prior to Volkswagen de México is a story of abundance. Even though cultivation in the area follows ‘rain-time,’ - land is rainfed *(tierra de temporal)*- a good amount of squash, zucchini, beans, and corn, produced by campesino labor, could be harvested. Besides these crops, fruit trees, river shrimp, carp, and

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99 Saving money in Don Gabriel’s account is a sign of greediness, profit for the private pocket and not for *el pueblo*, the community (Hill 1995:111). Snodgrass 2002 has a story similar to Don Gabriel’s. He tells the case of Ramu, a man in India, entering the market economy and how this was seen as “immoral” because his wage was not for the community but for savings and for life insurance. Ramu, however, even though he found working for a wage stressful, found wage labor liberating from the unpredictable demands of his community.
tadpoles could be obtained from lakes, rivers, and wetlands and fresh drinkable water came from springs and aquifers. All of these were integral to the peasants’ staple diet and source of livelihood. Prior to the arrival of Volkswagen de México, as Chabelo emphatically argues, “peasants were never hungry.”

The arrival of Volkswagen de México and, more specifically, the transformation of land into raw material to build the infrastructure of the car economy is more than a transformation from agricultural production to industrial production. Instead, Volkswagen de México represents the contradiction of expropriating fertile land and of extracting massive amounts of water under the logic of “jobs” and “growth.”

In the previous chapter, I elucidated how the factory is celebrated in Puebla as “bringing jobs [and] money.” Regardless of the capitalist economic model (ISI or EOI), Volkswagen is considered an engine of “economic growth” at the local and national levels. Within the logic of “jobs” and “economic growth,” Volkswagen de México and the infrastructure of car production have been regarded as being of “public utility.” These were the arguments put forth in decrees to dispossess peasants of their land and although not stated as explicitly, their water. The jobs that the factory provides continue to be celebrated in Puebla for “bringing money.” Volkswagen’s car economy has meant the creation and reproduction of a collectivity that has skills, know-how, cultural, and social capital (education, language, and connections) while simultaneously rupturing a collectivity whose mode of organizing and livelihood was deeply connected to the cultivation of land. The car economy ruptured the peasant and indigenous collectivity that lived in the towns of Almecatla, Sanctorum, and Ocotlán. The car economy tapped into and has deepened and reproduced the existing inequalities and exclusions that have long shaped Mexico’s nation-state formation.
Although *El Frente* emphasizes the land dispossession for infrastructural projects that is the result of an expropriation, the group also acknowledges that often peasants “willingly” exchange land for money. Yet, money is ephemeral. When addressing audiences and in private conversations Agustin points out that “*campesinos* get excited when they see a lot of money at once.” He tells a story of a peasant that bought a car and turned it into a taxi with the money obtained as compensation for his *ejido*. For a while things went well but then the car broke down. Now, he doesn’t have the money to buy a new one. The implicit morale in this anecdote is that, unlike land, money doesn’t last. Money offers a fleeting moment of bonanza.

But the most significant incommensurability and contradiction that *Volkswagen de México* represents goes beyond a moral tale. The material implications of exchanging land for money are not contained by a particular temporality. The incommensurability and contradiction that *Volkswagen de México* represents is the expropriation of fertile land under the rationale of “jobs” and “economic growth.” At events opposing infrastructural projects, incommensurability and contradiction are not only evoked and illustrated by describing peasant life, economies, and livelihoods before and after Volkswagen. It is also evoked and represented through an image that circulates in printed forms among activists: planting coins in a furrow. The caption of the image, which is constantly repeated at events is “Money cannot be eaten.”

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100 When Article 27 was reformed in 1992, it ended land re-distribution while also opening the legal avenue to transform *ejidos* into private property (see Foley 1995) To do so, a program known as PROCEDE (Program for the Certification of *Ejidal* Rights and Titling of Urban Plots) was created. Many *ejidatarios* indeed registered their *ejidos*. However, as Lynn Stephen (1996) shows, this doesn’t mean that *ejidatarios* embraced the neoliberal agenda that the reformation of Article 27 was meant to promote. Instead, as in the case of the *ejido* of *El Tule* in Oaxaca, *ejidatarios* participated in PROCEDE to obtain maps and individual certificates but collectively decided not to take the next step of titling their holdings as individual parcels. The participation of *ejidatarios* in PROCEDE, Stephen argues, must be understood in relation to the fear of losing land to the people of Tlalixcat (which happened before) and from PEMEX which had expropriated 30 hectares in the past.
The transformation from agricultural production to industrial car production is more than a shift in economic activity, subject formation, or the transformation or destruction of landscapes. Expropriating fertile land meant the elimination of sources of food and livelihoods and ruptured ways of being. To literally plant money into furrows doesn’t yield anything. Fertile land for “jobs” and “economic growth” is an incommensurate exchange. Land has a social and instrumental role and is a medium through which to make a livelihood across generations. Unlike
money, land extends to a future temporality. Jobs in the car economy are entangled with the
destruction of peasants’ economies and their livelihoods.\footnote{While my focus is on ‘use-value’ and social relation as ways to make claims on land and water, anthropologist Cory Hayden shows how transforming land into private property affects also claims on ethnobotanical knowledge, plants and animal species (2003).}

In the struggles against infrastructural projects, land and water are viewed as neither raw
material to enable car production nor casualties of the car economy. Water, in particular, does
not have a “market value” that is given in the form of a concession for industrial production and
for private profit. Neither can land be re-categorized nor expropriated as instrumental for projects
deemed to be of “public utility.”

Instead, the value ascribed to land and water is different. Thus, to begin understanding
this value, let me evoke Bronislaw Malinowski’s insights on the tilling methods, cultivating
practices, and agricultural rites of the Trobriand Islanders. He argues that “to understand how
land is owned, it is above all necessary to know how it is used and why it is valued” (2013:323).
In many societies, peasants continue to grow vegetables for family consumption and to sell in
local markets or even to a ‘middle man, as when corn is turned into tortillas and then sold. On
that land, many have also their homes, cattle, and chickens. In some parts of Mexico, land
continues to enable collective work, and in the particular case of ejidos, these also enable forms
of political representation. Connected to land and water then are livelihoods, modes of political
organizing, and socialities. More significantly, the uses of land and water and why these are
valued is succinctly described in the moral lesson of Coquin’s play at the Children’s Day
celebration: “Together we can defend the land and the water and our right to live off them.”
3.10 Reclaiming the Language of Rights

Coquin’s moral lesson and El Frente’s struggle for land and water cannot be understood as symptomatic of a struggle between the ‘nation’ and the ‘foreign’ or a reclamation of national territory against the presence of transnational capital. In other words, in the struggle against infrastructural projects, land and water are not defended because these are in the “dominion of the nation,” as stipulated in Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution.102 They are defended and reclaimed because land and water enable livelihoods and to accomplish this El Frente taps into a global struggle that defends natural resources against the predatory practices of capitalist development.

Rather than an opposition the national and the global, El Frente is struggling against how land and water—and natural resources such as oil, mines, etc., in general—are conceptualized in Article 27: as property of and under the dominion of the ‘nation’; as being inalienable and imprescriptible.103 Below are the first lines of Article 27,

The lands and the waters comprised within the limits of the national territory, originally belonging to ‘the nation,’ which has had and has the right to transmit their possession to individuals, constituting private property. Expropriations can only be done for the cause of public utility by means of compensation.104

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102 Article 27 comprises more than the constitution of ejidos. Broadly speaking, it governs the use of national resources (such as oil), and declares land, subsoil, and water to be property of the nation. See Chapter Two.

103 Imprescriptible means that natural resources as the property of the nation and inalienable do not expire.

104 “La propiedad de las tierras y aguas comprendidas dentro de los límites del territorio nacional, corresponde originalmente a la nación, la cual ha tenido y tiene el derecho de transmitir el dominio de ellas a los particulares, constituyendo la propiedad privada. Las expropiaciones solo podrán hacerse por causa de utilidad pública y mediante indemnización” (http://info4.juridicas.unam.mx/juslab/leylab/250/28.htm); my translation and my emphasis.
Natural resources are for distribution, environmental conservation, exploitable resources, or ejidos for the “collective exploitation.” Natural resources and ejidos in particular – even prior the reformation of Article 27 in 1992, – have never been protected from expropriation. Since the inception of ‘modern Mexico’ and the Constitution of 1917, natural resources and ejidos have been under the threat of expropriation or could be transformed into private property – the key form of property under economic liberalism (McClure 1996) as, within neoliberalism, “as a political-economic philosophy” private property goes hand in hand with “individual freedom” (Ganti 2014: 92).

Although ejidos, a form of social, and private property in their ownership entail different consequences and modes of representation, both forms of property are part of the same continuum of what anthropologist Katherine Verdery calls “property-making”: a project that is “a historical and political process” (2003:4). Any form of property-making entails a process of homogenization, objectification, and abstraction linked to what Fernando Coronil attributes to the “historical mutual constitution [of] modern state bureaucracies and global capitalism” (2001:124).

Besides struggling against forms of property-making that objectify land and water, El Frente is also struggling to re-conceptualize land and water as key for the reproduction, survival, and autonomy of peasants and indigenous people. Recall from the previous chapter, although the distribution of ejidos during the Cárdenas years was an attempt to create a more inclusive society, his project integrated indigenous people as “proletarians and peasants, official clients, and occasionally official caciques” (Knight 2008:30). Although the Mayo and Yaqui Indians as well as Maya peons partook in that project, Cárdenas’s regime – “sought to subsume the Indian to the mass of workers and peasants, stressing class over ethnicity: ‘the programme of the
emancipation of the Indian is, in essence, that of the emancipation of the proletariat of any country” (ibid).\textsuperscript{105}

In their defense and reclamation of land and water, \textit{El Frente} connects class and ethnic politics. Many of their members are Nahualt speaking people and they identify as indigenous and peasants. \textit{El Frente} defends \textit{ejidos} as land, as a means to produce use-value and as a medium of social relations but not so much as \textit{ejidos}, even though the \textit{ejido} enables communal organization and political rights. This is in part because some members own \textit{minifundios} and others, such as Juan, have no land at all. But more importantly, \textit{ejidos} symbolize a relationship to the state. It is a site of entangled relations between peasants and the state.

When Coquin conveys the moral lesson of the play or when \textit{El Frente} argues that land “must be returned to peasants” these assertions go beyond reclaiming land in the form of \textit{ejidos}. \textit{Ejido} can entail contentious relations with the state. In the group’s struggle over land and water, \textit{El Frente} aims at moving beyond objectified regimes of property. Agustin, Chabelo, and Juan emphasize that “the furrows peasants made to plant corn filter rainwater into the aquifers, refilling rivers of underground water [so that we] not only grow food but also help the planet.” This configuration of peasant labor and ‘nature’ represents the reciprocal relationship between peasants, water, and land.

\textit{El Frente} has its own discourse of ownership based on use-value, relationships to and through the land and water, and on the right to live off them. Although “rights” has a liberal foundation and in Mexico the discourse of Human Rights and Indigenous Rights is the product of the neoliberal state (Sierra 2005; Speed 2005) and is deployed as a strategy of governance that

\textsuperscript{105} Los días del presidente Cárdenas (Gonzalez 1981 cited in Knight 2008: 30). The agrarian reform did not legally recognize everyone as “agrarian-right subjects” (\textit{Sujetos de derecho agrario}) (Baitenman 2005:173).
grants “cultural rights” (Hale 2002; 2005), *El Frente* has appropriated the language of “rights.” In this appropriation, land and water are conceived as necessary for livelihoods, as having use-value but also as belonging to the commons. Peasants grow food and, as Agustín says, the furrows that they make filter water to the ground and cool down the planet. More importantly, this appropriation is not only rhetorical. The right to live off land and water is appropriated through peasants’ labor. Only through working the land can crops grow and water be filtered to refill aquifers. In this light, *El Frente* re-appropriates “public” to include a much larger collectivity.

### 3.11 Conclusion

Traces of car manufacturing are material traces of destruction that embody violent histories of land and water dispossession, and of ruptured ways of being and economies. Yet traces are more than a counter-narrative to the presence of *Volkswagen de México* and the car economy. They rather highlight two interrelated histories. One is oriented towards the past: hollow surfaces on the ground, desiccated lakes, springs and aquifers, trees that are no longer, and disrupted forms of living and of community. These histories are today recalled to remember the conditions that enabled the presence of Volkswagen in Puebla. In this sense, the traces illuminate the racialized violence, subjugation, destructions and disposessions that are entwined with today’s car economy.

The other story told by the traces is oriented towards the future. Each trace is a window into the consequences of ongoing infrastructural projects, and a reminder that these consequences are not only environmental but also impact social life, modes of relationality, and livelihoods. In this sense, the traces of car manufacturing have also given rise to a form of
heteroglossic ecological politics to rally against infrastructural projects. Within *El Frente’s* claims to land and water, a wide range of languages and visions converge: the nationalist language of “Land and Liberty,” and the global languages of the multicultural order such as indigenous and tribal rights, Human Rights, and Zapatismo. All these visions converge and add political valence to the traces of car manufacturing.

Traces of car manufacturing are an invitation to re-imagine a social relation among land, water, and labor. From traces emerges a moral claim. In the call to defend land and water, neither “capitalistas” nor state representatives are summoned. Instead, as the play at the Children’s Day Celebration suggests, children in the towns surrounding *Volkswagen de México* are called upon to defend their land and water and to assert the moral right to live off them.
Chapter 4

4 The Volkswagen Family

As I take the unnamed exit leading to Volkswagen de México, traffic begins to slow down. Traffic is usually dense but on this December 12th—the Day of the Virgin of Guadalupe—cars, public transportation buses, and flows of people make it even slower. Along with the usual food stands, extra street vendors are selling merchandise that hints at the upcoming Christmas celebration. The many vendors make the two-lane road that leads to the factory even narrower. The exhaust of cars and buses combined with the burning sun, which oddly is only felt in the winter months in Puebla, makes the wait feel endless.

The line to enter one of the many parking lots that Volkswagen has made available, however, is long. It is 9 a.m., and, like others arriving by car, I have lost all hope of finding a space in any of these lots. Driving along Volkswagen’s entrance, I see drivers stopping in front of the wide vertical cement column, whose top extends into two opposite horizontal but slightly diagonal columns. The vertical column is crowned by the blue and white Volkswagen logo. While driving by the entrance, I think of its two horizontal columns as arms that every day welcome workers and employees to Volkswagen de México and today, the Day of the Virgin of Guadalupe, also embrace their families.

On this day, la Planta, la Armadora, or la Vocho—as Volkswagen de México is known locally—stops car manufacturing for twenty-four hours. The celebration on the factory grounds brings together unionized workers and non-unionized hourly wage workers under monthly contracts, as well as salaried employees who are part of the administrative or management staff, and engineers. Although they are not explicitly invited, the celebration is also open to
subcontracted workers and people like me who are outsiders to Volkswagen’s social world. Workers and employees are invited to spend their day off at the factory, accompanied by their families. These might include wives, husbands, and children, grandparents, uncles, and aunts. Other family constellations consist of nuclear families where a son or a daughter brings their parents to show them their workplace. In some families, both father and son are employed by the factory. In many, it is just the father and in a few just the mother. Without their blue jeans and white polo shirts or white or blue overalls, it is difficult to identify who is directly employed by Volkswagen and who has merely come along for the day. The celebration of the Virgin of Guadalupe on the grounds of Volkswagen de México assembles “the Volkswagen family” for a day of celebration.\textsuperscript{106}

In this chapter, I turn my attention to “the Volkswagen Family” – a trope that is actively put to work by Volkswagen de México. The factory uses the trope to address the labor force and as such, it is a technique of labor management. The family trope evokes inclusivity, belongings, and a close-knit, intergenerational, and homogenous collectivity. It is asserted both orally and through practices such as the celebration of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Yet, significantly, the family trope is malleable and is also utilized by those employed at Volkswagen de México to articulate care and protection. The relationship between factory and employees is a fictive kinship relation.

Belongings are not a top-down process. People in Puebla craft themselves to become suitable candidates for work at the factory and to become part of “the Volkswagen family.”

\textsuperscript{106} Although the Day of the Virgin of Guadalupe is an official holiday in Mexico, December 12th is not marked in article 74 of Mexico’s Labor Code as an obligatory holiday.
While at first glance this crafting is an example of economic and calculative rationality, I suggest that it is better understood as an example of how the hegemony of the car economy has shaped a labor market. Doing so enables us to see processes of accommodation within the global car economy – processes that are not always successful. This crafting intersects with local ideas about status and class which also fuel the aspiration to work for the factory. Nevertheless, this aspiration continues to reproduce the imaginary of the factory as a medium of possibilities and opportunities.

Personal crafting is an ongoing process. Once a job has materialized, crafting continues in order to embody what my interlocutors and the factory call the “German work culture.” This project of self-making, however, is an ideal, a driving force that never fully materializes.

Moreover, I show how inequalities and relations of exploitation are interpreted, described, and explained using the language of ‘culture.’ This language is not confined to my interlocutors but is also used by the factory and the Mexican government. Thus two ‘work cultures’ are constructed, represented, and compared. As in the past, when car industries arrived in Mexico, today Volkswagen de México is not only praised for car production but also for transforming “Mexican work culture.”

This transformation is not a smooth process. Rather, its genesis illuminates one of the most violent moments in the history of Volkswagen in Mexico: the 1992 labor conflict that restructured production, labor relations, and the triadic social contract between workers, factory, and the state. By sketching the 1992 conflict, I shed light on the violence that underpins “the Volkswagen Family.” The family trope signifies inclusivity and belongings entangled with inner fractions and relations of domination and subjugation.

Thus, in this chapter I offer the vantage point of the double-edge of the car economy as it unfolds on the factory grounds. I show how inequalities, subjugation, and domination are
entangled with forms of care, belongings, and even possibilities to make a livelihood. Grappling
with this double-edge sheds light on the different terms by which people are drawn into,
excluded from, or included in *Volkswagen de México*.

### 4.1 Belongings Entangled with Fractures

Every December 12\(^{th}\), since the factory opened in 1967, *Volkswagen de México* transforms its car
manufacturing areas into a space to celebrate the Day of the Virgin of Guadalupe. The cold
fluorescent lights that, for twenty-four hours, seven days a week, illuminate the assembly lines,
are replaced by warm lights radiating from improvised altars. The Virgin statues that are every
day dispersed along the lines to protect workers against accidents are brought together on altars.
The steady, repetitive, and upbeat tempo that marks the rhythm of car production has stopped.
The assembly lines are silent – a silence that is replaced, in turn, by a cacophony made up of
songs, chatter, clapping, and laughter.

The fast and mechanical body movements that characterize car assemblage are
substituted by the leisurely stroll of workers at ease. Animating the Virgin’s celebration are
clowns making animal figures out of balloons for laughing children, while others are organizing
games or telling jokes. The aliveness of the hallways contrasts with the static assembly lines on
which car-parts are lined up one after the other, and with the immobile robots at the welding
stations. The discordant mixture of sounds and activities stops only when *mariachis*, singing the
traditional Mexican birthday song *Las Manañitas*, signal the beginning of the mass in honor of
the Virgin of Guadalupe.

The day of the Virgin of Guadalupe is one of the most symbolic dates for the Mexican
nation. The celebration touches upon larger religious and national imaginaries: the underpinnings
of the Virgin of Guadalupe are both religious and nationalistic. The Guadalupe symbol, Eric Wolf argues, “links together family, politics and religion; colonial past and independent present; Indian and Mexican. [It is a] ‘collective representation’ [connecting] inhabitants of far off Indian villages to the members of socialist trade union locals” (1958:38). The Virgin of Guadalupe, Valentina Napolitano argues, is a “multifaceted symbol of inculturation and subversion of colonial presence, as embodying the struggle for independence of the new nation, and anxieties about the latter’s secular and religious roots” (2009:98). She is the symbol of mestizaje and of the mestizo nation (Elizondo 2000, cited in Napolitano 2009:99).107 The celebration of the Virgin of Guadalupe on the factory grounds connects Volkswagen de México, Puebla, and Mexico. It is a continuum that is spatial, temporal, religious, and national.

The celebration of the Virgin of Guadalupe at Volkswagen de México is embedded within larger social, historical, and cultural imaginaries. The factory becomes part of a collective identity. The celebration of the Virgin of Guadalupe on the grounds of the factory is a ritual that produces the German corporation not as an abstract transnational corporation but as intimately belonging to Mexico.

Or, as Mario, a Volkswagen unionized worker for thirty years, sarcastically puts it, “It is the only day that Volkswagen bathes itself with the masses” (darse un baño de pueblo). With this description, Mario highlights that the celebration of the Virgin of Guadalupe is an attempt to blur the social distance between factory and labor force: distances based on race, class, and

107 The Virgin can signify even opposite projects and visions: she can be a symbol of liberation and struggle along the U.S. – Mexico border as well as symbol that signals the “strengthening of an Orthodox (as ultramontane) transnational Catholic Church” (Napolitano 2009:96) in Rome.
positionality within the factory structure. Although highly critical of the celebration, José still brings his two granddaughters to the factory on this day to enjoy the festive atmosphere.

Besides clowns and music, there is also a replica of a ‘German Christmas Market’ and the display of a modified version of the 2012 Beetle that is currently being manufactured at the factory. It has seven seats divided into three rows. Children, adults, teenagers, and José’s granddaughters wait their turn to sit in, touch, and capture their moment in a picture with these Beetles. On the doors of the Beetles, it reads “Production Begins” and “Made in Mexico.”

The celebration of the Virgin of Guadalupe is the most visible event that performs ‘family’ and ‘belonging.’ Attended by families that are already deeply connected to Volkswagen de México, a sense of belonging and the family-like atmosphere are also crafted and symbolized by the Virgin of Guadalupe, as she symbolizes family, nation and belonging. As a family celebration connecting different scales and imaginaries, the celebration of the Virgin of Guadalupe expands the meaning of the collectivity implied by “the Volkswagen Family.”

4.2 The Family Trope in Mexico

The family trope is not unique to Volkswagen de México. General Motors in Mexico put this trope to work among the first generation of Mexican autoworkers in the 50s and 60s. Historian Steven J. Bachelor describes how the trope encouraged Mexican autoworkers to see themselves as part of a “transnational corporate family” (2001:275), creating the sense of belonging and loyalty to a larger family of employees and workers in the United States. The trope implied a

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108 In the U.S. families came into to play in a more literal sense in the context of Fordism. Henry Ford attempted to turn immigrant men working at his factory into “Americans.” Ford went beyond the factory grounds in order to discipline laborers and make them citizens with American values. In order to turn the mostly immigrant labor force into “American Families,” Ford’s Sociological Department inspected the life of laborers and organized family life (Meyer 1981; Grandin 2010).
community that transcended class, national origins, and race. Moments of conviviality between workers and the president of General Motors in Mexico as well as the director of personnel who regularly had a bite to eat with workers in the car assemblage spaces, shaped a sense of family.

But the sense of family was also crafted by practices of corporate benevolence and welfare capitalism. Benefits such as paid vacations, medical assistance, and access to evening English classes were significant in crafting belongings. Factory fútbol and baseball teams crafted a sense of compañeroismo (camaraderie) among autoworkers. Benefits were also offered to retain workers and avoid turnover. An autoworker described working on the lines as “grueling,” work that left him “exhausted at the end of each day [but he] felt part of the family at the company…it was so nice at the factory. We were all part of la familia General Motors” (Bachelor 2001:275).

Workers inhabited the General Motors Family and evoked the trope to speak of their sense of belonging with the factory. Yet, they also emphasized a particular social relation associated with family: brothers as part of a collective “we.” Through this appropriation, workers chastised recent hires that assembled faster since they were modifying the pace of the line and undermining the collective “we.” As such, workers also imbued la familia General Motors with the expectation that workers should come first before productivity. Putting productivity first meant betraying the family. Yet, after the 1962 presidential decree to create the “Mexican automotive industry,” calls for productivity and competition increased: older workers were forced to retire and were replaced by younger workers for half of the wage, restricted bathroom breaks were introduced, and speed of the line increased. This restructuration led to a strike in
1965. The practices that crafted a sense of family and even the use of the trope ended after the workers’ collective action against General Motors.\textsuperscript{109}

Historian Michel Snodgrass (2003) shows the paternalist and benevolent practices used by the Cuauhtémoc Brewery located in Monterrey, Mexico, a Mexican-owned company. From 1890 to 1940, the director treated workers as children in need of protection and attempted to make them feel part of a family, which, though paternalistic, sought to minimize social distance. Clerks (white-collar workers) and obreros (blue-collar workers) were all addressed as trabajadores (working people) to blur social distinctions. Entire rural families were recruited to work in order to shape a loyal labor force. Nonwage benefits such as medical services, cultural events, mutualist societies, and even a company magazine were practices that simultaneously created and addressed the Cuauhtémoc family. Hiring family members of trusted employees and encouraging marriage among trabajadores also enhanced the ‘family-like atmosphere.’ However, according to company policy, women were required to retire following marriage.

Paternalistic practices and familial relationships aimed at preventing militant unionism.\textsuperscript{110}

The family trope has also been put to work within Mexico’s political landscape to exhort and evoke national belongings. The Partido Nacional Revolucionario, founded in 1929 and renamed Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) in 1938, that ruled for seventy-years encouraged “Mexicans across class, regional, ethnic, race, gender and generational lines […] to

\textsuperscript{109} Comparatively, anthropologist Dorinne Kondo (1990) examines how the family trope organizes labor relations in a small Japanese factory that produces sweets, The Sato Company. Managers instrumentalize the trope to shape workers’ lives, and to create disciplined and loyal employees. “Company as family,” however, here only includes full time employees. Yet, the family idiom is also appropriated and used to criticize labor conditions such as low wages or making employees work long hours. These practices are seen as a departure from what a ‘true family’ would do. “Company as family” can easily become a ground for irony, ambiguity, and resistance. See also Dunn (2004) for the use of kin metaphor shaping the social relations at a baby food factory in Poland.

\textsuperscript{110} The Cuauhtémoc Brewery was owned by the Garza Sada family. This family also owned HYLSA (see Chapter Two and Three). The Gaza Sada are among the most powerful industrialist families in Mexico. They also owned FEMSA, the largest franchise of Coca Cola. In 2010, Heineken International bought both companies.
feel part of the new ‘Revolutionary Family’ to which they belonged by birth and which spoke in their name” (Joseph et al. 2001:4). More recently, a Mexican drug cartel has tapped into the family trope: “La Familia Michoacana.” Recently too, “the family” has been used in the so-called “movement for the family” (movimiento para la familia) to reassert heteronormativity and to promote marriage only between ‘woman’ and ‘man.’

The family trope is used widely in Mexico not only to represent a coherent heteronormative whole but also to organize social relations. As these examples demonstrate, the family trope has a multiplicity of valences and no definitive fixed meaning (see also Kondo 1990). Its use aims at exhorting people to be part an imaginary coherent whole while also manifesting a sense of belonging. In Mexico as elsewhere, ‘family’ is a patriarchal relation. In the case of corporations, the trope constructs the company as a provider. Belongings, however, are crafted differently depending on place, socio-historical moment, and cultural context, and through different practices. The trope can also be appropriated by those whom “family” seeks to address. However, appropriating the trope, as the case of General Motor autoworkers illustrates, also “legitimizes” the trope (Kondo 1990). While it is used to articulate a critique, the use of it simultaneously legitimizes the power relations signified by the trope.

As in the contexts described above, “the Volkswagen Family” evokes belongings and inclusivity. The trope is not only evoked orally but is also reasserted, for instance, through collective donations to charity programs run by Volkswagen de México. In this scheme, unionized laborers donate one day of their wages once a year and Volkswagen matches the total amount. The trope comes to play when Volkswagen invites its employees to join its project of

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111 Mexican president Plutarco Elías Calles (1924-28) considered himself to be the guide of this family (Garrido 1982:106).
environmental protection, “Out of the Love for the Planet.” Charity donations, projects of sustainability, and events organized by *Volkswagen de México* that take place outside of the factory grounds are often described through the pronoun “we”, which is an idiom of inclusivity and represents a collectivity: “The Volkswagen Family.” It has also been crafted by shaping a skilled labor force in its *Escuela de Capacitación* – a training center that has served as a vocational school since 1966 (Rieger 2013:266). Many of today’s workers were trained there after finishing high school. Their children too are now being trained. But the event that most visibly performs and crafts family is the annual celebration of the Virgin of Guadalupe on the factory grounds. It is a moment of conviviality and a ritual that performs belongings and inclusions. On this day, even an ethnographer can belong to the Volkswagen family.

Besides understanding “The Volkswagen Family” as a technique of labor management and paternalism, it can also be understood as a form of fictive kinship since there is no connection through blood or marriage. However, the lack of blood or legal familial connection does not make the kinship less real, less powerful, or less meaningful. Practices of corporate benevolence are associated with parental practices of care and protection. Although not articulated, the family-like sense also draws from kin relations that have been formed within the factory grounds: fathers and sons working together on the lines, wives and husbands working in the administrative staff, boyfriends and girlfriends working in manufacturing. Yet, unlike the “YPF kinship” of the publicly owned oil company YPF Estatal in the Argentinean oil fields (Shever 2008), while a father can help his son to enter Volkswagen’s vocational school, the son cannot take his father’s position. “Family” therefore works differently at Volkswagen. Before I delve into how the family trope is deployed, inhabited, and articulated, I elucidate the *context* in which this trope circulates.
4.3 Frictions and Hierarchies

Against the backdrop of the celebration of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the family trope circulates within the context of labor uncertainty, a fragmented labor force, and antagonisms between workers and employees. Frictions, hierarchies and uncertain labor relations are structurally embedded yet at the same hierarchies are also connected to local ideas about prestige, class, and status.

This is a context in which unionized workers and non-unionized workers are pitted against each other, every day, for twenty-four hours seven days a week, on the assembly lines. The uncertain employment of about 2,000 people under monthly contracts combined with the attempt of managers to increase production has created frictions on the line. Workers under monthly contracts, in the hope of making it into the ranks of the unionized labor force, and to impress managers, try to assemble faster. However, often pieces are not assembled correctly, thus forcing the line to stop in order to re-assemble pieces and creating backlog. Unionized workers prefer not to work alongside non-union workers. While the resulting antagonism between unionized and non-unionized workers is a structural product, it shapes the social relations among them.

In addition to these antagonisms, the family trope is reasserted at moments when the older members of “the Volkswagen family” have become disposable, as unionized workers in the highest wage ranks are encouraged to retire. Younger workers under monthly contracts, subcontracted workers, or white-collar workers who are college graduates, are replacing them at lower wages.

The trope also circulates within the context of social distinctions between workers and employees – distinctions that are structural but that also tap into local ideas about prestige in
relation to the kind of work a person does and in relation to their positionality within the factory. Agustin, a Volkswagen employee in the area of Acquisitions for twenty years, pointed out the differences between workers and employees during his description of why he likes working for Volkswagen de México. In his description, Agustin articulates a field of power where a relation of hierarchy is at play.

Agustin likes working for Volkswagen de México—he began working there in his mid-20s-- because the factory *te cuida,* “takes care of you.” While explaining how Volkswagen shows its care towards him, he also illustrates what for him makes *empleados* (employees) and workers different from each other beyond the type of work.

[Volkswagen] cares for your development *[cuida tu desarrollo]*, treats you well, and you know what is really happening [because the factory] shares its vision. At this level [i.e., at the administrative level], there is nothing to hide. We understand why salaries cannot be increased which is impossible to understand at the level of the laborer on the assembly line. [They] don’t understand that, although there are many cars being produced, this doesn’t mean that cars are selling. There are many cars now in the warehouses and laborers think these cars would be sold at the same speed as they are produced. But it is not like that.

“Understanding” here is a form of social distinction. Although he does not clarify if workers have access to charts and sales statistics, in his view they cannot understand—which implies a mental capacity tied to workers’ type of work. ‘Understanding’ (or not) is also the product of social position within the factory structure, a position that also fuels and constitutes ideas about class and status in Mexico’s larger socio-economic structure: working in an office involves
mental labor, unlike the assembly lines which involve a mechanical and repetitive labor. Simultaneously, Agustin suggests that different positionalities with the factory structure are significant not only to social distinctions but they also serve to rationalize low salaries and wages.

But as Agustin also suggests, there is a sense of inclusivity and belonging that is shaped by practices of care and protection. In suggesting that *la planta* “cares for your development,” Agustin articulates how, during his twenty-five years of working there, Volkswagen has shown concern for his personal growth, individual achievement, well-being, and career. What the factory is goes beyond mere instrumentality. Volkswagen is not only a medium to have a career and job. It is a fatherly caregiver. “The Volkswagen Family” circulates in a contentious context that it is structurally created but at the same time taps into local ideas about prestige and status. How inclusion into this family works is rather different. While some are included as just a labor force, others such as Agustin speak of a sense of inclusion through practices of care. Care at *Volkswagen de México* works selectively.

### 4.4 Inhabiting “The Volkswagen Family”

“The Volkswagen Family” exceeds the factory grounds. Engineering students sponsored by *Volkswagen de México* described the company as “being like a family.” This relationship emerged after *Volkswagen de México* became the *padrino* (godfather) of the Engineering in Automotive Design major at *Universidad Popular Autónoma de Puebla* (UPAEP), a private university (see Epilogue). Culturally and historically, becoming a *padrino* establishes social relations, especially a relationship of extended social networks, and it ritually establishes co-
parenthood (Mintz and Wolf 1950; Foster 1969), a form of fictive kinship through Catholic baptism.  

Volkswagen de México as padrino reconfigures how this relationship is established. It is a relationship formed with a company and it is the means to perform corporate benevolence. But like the padrino that baptism establishes, this relationship with Volkswagen de México seems to also incorporate the parental duty of providing the dependent children with skills and education, the means to make a livelihood (Gutmann 2007:71). While these are articulated as duties, they are also articulated as care. Although, as Matthew Gutmann argues “forms of parenting change throughout the course of a life,” there is the sense in Mexico that parents, while alive, will watch out for their children (ibid). The duties of Volkswagen de México as a padrino include sponsoring students with a four-year fellowship including one year in Germany, access to mentorship from German and Mexican executives at the company, and the promise of a job at the end of their studies. Being a padrino and the obligations it implies craft a sense of belonging to a family and of being taken care of.

Within the grounds of Volkswagen de México, the family trope is evoked, albeit not by everyone. None of the workers with whom I did fieldwork ever used the trope. In fact, they were highly critical of it. As one worker put it, “la familia Volkswagen is like a Sicilian family” while another sarcastically asked, “Why would I consider Volkswagen my family?” Even though these are critiques and suggest the contentious context of the trope’s circulation, they also show the assumptions about family at play.

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112 Fictive kinship can also be established by marriages, or quince años – the coming of age party for women; but the only event that establishes co-parenthood is Catholic baptism. Establishing fictive kinship is not only a practice that unfolds in peasant communities but also in cities in Mexico (Carlos 1973).
In contrast to the workers, Volkswagen’s independent union actively uses the trope to address and represent the unionized labor force. In 2009, the former General Secretary Victor Cervantes described the 10,000 unionized workers as “belonging” to “the Volkswagen Family” in a written message to the unionized workers that appeared in the union’s magazine Poder Sindical. The current union committee used a representation of “the Volkswagen Family” as their logo during the 2011 elections. It represents three sets of interconnected collectivities: the heteronormative nuclear family, the unionized labor force, and the factory. In this depiction we can see a lingering presence of Fordism as a nostalgic memory and perhaps an ongoing longing for its materialization (Muehlebach and Shoshan 2012: 318).

White-collar workers also evoke the family trope to describe their relationship to the factory. Paty is a Mexican woman in her thirties and a college graduate. She has been working for Volkswagen de México for five years and belongs to the category of ‘trustworthy employees.’ Her work consists of inspecting auto-parts that have been imported from the United States and Argentina. Similarly to Agustin, Paty also likes to work for the factory “because Volkswagen is socially responsible to its workers and to the planet; we donate money to environmental projects to preserve the ecosystem through the program ‘Out of Love for the Planet’”.

To point out the difference between Volkswagen de México and other companies, in particular within the uncertain socio-economic context of Mexico, Paty describes her previous work experience. She used to work for a Volkswagen supplier until one day, after two years, managers told her not to return the next day because there was no money for the payroll. At

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113 This category of workers was created after a major process of labor restructuring in 1992, to which I turn shortly. ‘Trustworthy employees’ are replacing retiring unionized workers. They hold managerial positions and are not unionized.
Volkswagen de México, on the other hand, Paty feels she is going “somewhere” and that her work is valued. Volkswagen’s valuation of her work was signaled by a recent offer made by the factory: to move to the factory that Volkswagen opened in Silao, Guanajuato in a higher and better paid position. All combined, Volkswagen de México gives Paty a “sense of stability.”

For Paty, however, Volkswagen stands for more than the practical need for a stable and well-paid job. It nurtures, cares for, and is responsible for its workers. The factory pays 80% of Paty’s online Master’s degree –and for her boyfriend too, who also works for Volkswagen. Both of them are pursuing online Master’s degrees in Industrial Engineering at the Tecnológico de Monterrey, campus Puebla, one of the most expensive universities in Mexico. Paty recognizes that “at the end of the day, Volkswagen is a company, and it is in its best interest to have efficient people but at the same time, the factory can choose anyone; I don’t see why it has to pay for our Masters.” Precisely because Volkswagen is more than a practical means of meeting the need for a job, the care that the factory shows makes it so that “Volkswagen feels like a family.”

Paty reproduces the sense of belonging and the broad collectivity that “the Volkswagen Family” implies. The ways she inhabits this collectivity are constituted by two co-existing and intertwined rationales: the utilitarian rationale of making Paty a more efficient worker, a technique for producing ‘human capital,’ along with the rationale (or expectation) that Volkswagen shows its ‘care’ for and ‘nurtures’ its labor force. Paty’s example suggests that while the trope is asserted orally by management to exhort those employed by the factory to see themselves as part of “the Volkswagen family” to which they belong by working there, there are other ways of crafting inclusivity. While the language of “care” and the practice of supporting the postgraduate education of white-collar workers and of donating to biodiversity projects are common practices of corporate social responsibility –the new discourse of corporate benevolence– these are practices that also serve to craft the sense of “the Volkswagen family.”
The family trope and the sense of belonging and inclusivity that it implies are pervasive. At the celebration of the Virgin of Guadalupe in 2011, I came across another set of representations of “the Volkswagen family” which again illustrate how the factory has put to work this trope, as well as its malleability. Several children’s drawings had been submitted to the contest “My Family is Volkswagen” and were displayed in the parking lot hosting the German Christmas Market.

Most of the drawings represent common social relations associated with ‘family’: a heteronormative nuclear family including different representations of Volkswagen. The drawings depict spaces of family conviviality and activities: a family about to have a meal next to a car being assembled, or the family riding in a Beetle.

Figure 6. Representation of “The Volkswagen Family”: “Una Familia Volkswagen, Fé (A Volkswagen Family, Faith)

Although at Volkswagen de México the female workforce is 7.8% –a percentage that includes women on the assembly lines and those at the administrative level– only two drawings of about seventy – about 3% of the drawings- depict a female breadwinner.
One drawing depicts the factory and the father as providers and protectors by merging the father figure with the VW logo.

The drawings –similar to the union’s logo- depict two interconnected collectivities: nuclear family and the Volkswagen family. Along with a labor relationship, they foreground a social
relationship between workers, families, and the factory. But they also seem to bring in expectations associated with family in Mexico. As in Paty’s example, “the Volkswagen Family” takes care of you (Gutmann 2010; see also Shever 2008).

Notably, however, the drawing that won the contest breaks with the representation of family depicted in most of the other drawings. Entitled “All Puebla is Volkswagen,” the drawing shows a map of the state of Puebla filled with harmoniously arranged blue Beetles and one yellow Beetle to mark the city of Puebla. This drawing takes up the popular slogan ‘Puebla is Volkswagen.’ The drawing depicts ‘family’ and the celebrated relationship between factory and city, through the commodities that are manufactured at Volkswagen: Puebla is made up of cars, not of people.

Figure 9. “Todo Puebla es una familia Volkswagen” (All Puebla is a Volkswagen Family)
Without wanting to read too much into this contest, declaring this drawing to be the winner seems to contain the excess of meaning in the other depictions and even in Paty’s account. It reasserts that the relationship between workers—regardless of the category—is measurable and a commensurable exchange of wages for labor power with no other strings or obligations attached. This is the limit or the breakdown of “the Volkswagen family” that Paty and the other children’s drawings represent.

Paty’s use of the trope and the children’s drawings arguably reproduce a corporate ideology, and by inhabiting, reasserting, and naturalizing “the Volkswagen Family,” they make it all the more powerful. Inhabiting the trope legitimizes it and makes it something more than a technique of management. The power of the family trope and its circulation illustrate the embeddedness of Volkswagen de México. In its malleability, the trope is tweaked to emphasize nurturing, caring, and protection. Once “the Volkswagen Family” is inhabited, it is infused with the meanings and expectations associated with parenting.

The sense of inclusivity and belonging is also emphasized via the use of the pronoun ‘we.’ While the company exhorts employees to join Volkswagen’s project of environmental protection, to see themselves as participants in the global practice of protecting ‘biodiversity,’ using ‘we’—by Paty, employees like her, and the factory—illustrates the homogenous collectivity at work in “the Volkswagen family.” ‘We’ is widely used by employees, engineers, and people in managerial positions and even by their families to refer to the Volkswagen collectivity.

If ‘we’ represents inclusivity, belonging, and a collectivity between those who are employed at the factory and Volkswagen de México, saying something against Volkswagen de México becomes an attack on that ‘we.’ I learned this through my conversations with Lina, a Mexican woman married to a German engineer. I know Lina from way back in Puebla. We met at Puebla’s public university UAP our first day classes, both majoring in ‘Accounting and
Finances,’ and we dropped out of college about the same time. After that, she moved to Ciudad del Carmen in the south of Mexico to work as a translator for a British company that does quality certification on the oil platforms; I joined her later when she got me a job in the same company, and I lived with her, her father, and his partner for about a year. When I moved to New York City, Lina moved to Germany with her boyfriend who was an intern at Volkswagen de México for three years. When she got married in Puebla to her German boyfriend, I traveled from the U.S. to attend their wedding.

My sense of familiarity was ruptured, however, when, in our conversations about Volkswagen de México, Lina kept repeating to me that “we think that the problems and conflicts at the factory are cultural, the Mexican culture does not understand German culture and vice versa; we need to mix the creativity of the Mexican with the organization of the German; we need to Mexicanize the German and Germanize the Mexican – the perfect mix.” Besides being struck by her use of ‘we’ and the language of culture to explain social relationships at the factory, what struck me the most was the realization of how deep this collective identification runs. When I suggested to Lina that conflicts at the factory are not so much cultural but are also related to relations of exploitation, subjugation, and inequality, her answer left me bewildered: “I hope we don’t end up having a fall out” while looking straight into my eyes.

4.5 Belongings

It isn’t just the factory that works to craft belongings. Belongings to Volkswagen de México are also crafted by those employed by the factory. Although this crafting resembles how in other company contexts workers shape themselves to be the ideal employee (Kondo 1990; Kasmir 2001; 2004), the crafting to belong to Volkswagen de México is about becoming a suitable
candidate for the factory. As a college student, Paty actively shaped herself to get a job at the factory. She studied Business Management because “in the 90s that is what everybody who wanted to work for *Volkswagen de México* studied.” She also learned English and German in private language schools –languages that up to this day continue to be seen as an asset for candidates wanting to work for Volkswagen.

In college at Puebla’s public university –*Universidad Autónoma de Puebla* (UAP), Paty was able to get an internship through the university at a Volkswagen supplier in Germany. Paty used this opportunity to polish her German and to begin cultivating in herself what she sees as German values: order and efficiency. “Germans have clear objectives, are very orderly, and care about quality and time.” Now, at *Volkswagen de México*, Paty continues cultivating what a large number of white-collar employees call “the German work culture.” Crafting belongings is not a top-down process. To belong to “the Volkswagen Family,” to embody the cultural capital, know-how, and skills but also the values of this family, the self-disciplining begins even prior to working for the factory. Yet this process is never complete. Once a job at the factory materialized, Paty continued cultivating in herself key values of industrial capitalism: efficiency, time management, and order.

The crafting of the self is driven by the aspiration to work at *Volkswagen de México*. Yet resources, time, and effort put into belonging to the factory do not always materialize in a job. Pepe is in his mid-twenties and has been trying for a while to become part of *Volkswagen de México*. On a tour visit to the factory organized by *Universidad de las Americas, Puebla* (UDLAP), Pepe recounts to me that he studied Business Management and is fluent in German

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114 The tour is part of the university’s program *Viajes y Visitas Empresariales Primavera 2011* (business travels and visits, spring 2011). In agreement with MNCs and TNCs such as *Volkswagen de México*, the university, for about $5 dollars per person, takes students to visit the factory grounds.
and English. He learned English by completing his elementary and high school education in one of Puebla’s most expensive private bilingual schools, *El Colegio Americano*. He learned German during his college years at the same public university as Paty: UAP. As a college student, he saw learning German as a strategy to enhance his chances of getting a job at *Volkswagen de México*. To polish his German language skills, he lived in Berlin for about a year. Similarly to Paty, Pepe has been crafting himself to become a suitable candidate for *Volkswagen de México*. However, unlike for Paty, a job has not materialized for him. He is taking the tour in the hope of learning more about how he can get a job there.

Besides Pepe, there are twelve students from different disciplines such as Mechanical and Industrial Engineering, Mathematics, and even International Law taking the tour. What distinguishes Pepe from the other students is that he already has a college degree and even the experience of working for a German company—Müller Weingarten, Mexico, a German multinational that supplies Volkswagen with technology. As a side note, Pepe informs me that this is the same company that in Germany produces Mexican coins and bills. Pepe gives a lot of weight to his work experience at Müller Weingarten but he also admits that he quit after only three months. The salary was “too low, 4,500 pesos per month; a heavy workload, long hours, and lots of responsibilities.” More than half of his salary went to gasoline. “I was just working to fill the gas tank to be able to go to work.”

Pepe is now desperate to find a job. After eight months, he even would go back to his old job or to any Volkswagen supplier even though, he interjects, the pay is not as good as it is at *la Volkswagen*. His dream job is at *Volkswagen de México*: “I heard that jobs are stable, salary is good and that you can lease a Volkswagen car; and sometimes [the factory] sends people to Germany; perhaps I can go back there.” To materialize his dream, Pepe is willing to do an unpaid internship at the factory. But since he is no longer a student, he cannot get the university
insurance that Volkswagen de México requires of all its interns coming from Mexican universities. He knows people from his school days who are already working there but so far nothing has materialized through his connections.

At the end of the tour, Pepe asks the female tour guide about the profile of people hired by Volkswagen de México and if everybody has to take a test. The answer: “90% of the people we hire are engineers and yes, everybody has to take a test which can only be taken once. If you fail, there is not a second chance.” Although Pepe would like to find a way to get a job at the factory, he is not comfortable taking the test because “there is a lot of mathematics.” And that is the reason why he didn’t study engineering even though he considered it a way to increase his chances at Volkswagen de México. But he is “not good with numbers.” When in college, he thought that a business degree and language skills would be enough to get a job at Volkswagen de México.

The aspiration to work for and belong to Volkswagen de México is not confined to college-educated people. Ramiro is a thirty-year-old man who spent fifteen years working in the United States. He came back to Mexico because of the 2008 financial crisis. Although he would prefer going back, crossing the border is becoming more dangerous and expensive. If he has to remain in Mexico, he explains, the only place that provides a “good wage is la Volkswagen.”

I first met Ramiro after he ran a marathon that Volkswagen de México sponsored in 2011. For two years, he has been trying to enter Volkswagen’s workforce but he doesn’t know anyone who can connect him to the union. Two of his aunts work as maids for “a German who works at the factory but they don’t ever see him.” Volkswagen de México gives “the best wages in the whole city plus once you get la planta (become a unionized worker) you have more benefits.”

While waiting to meet a “connection” or for “a struck of good luck,” Ramiro has held two low paid jobs. He worked in a small handmade furniture company but ended up quitting
because the factory took one day of wage – from the total of 750 pesos per week (about $ 50) - as well as 40% of the next day after he was sick for a day. Prior to this job, he worked with a butcher but the pay was low and “everybody gossiped all the time,” thus he quit.

While describing his different work experiences, he emphasized what these experiences had done for him. He constantly repeated that his fifteen years of experience as a migrant construction worker have shaped him (me han formado) to work in the auto-industry. Working in construction has taught him to be organized, reliable, to know how to work with tools, to do his work on time, and to not spend time chatting with co-workers. To give me an example of what he meant, he told me that although making furniture paid little, he preferred that job over working with the butcher because he was alone in his station. “In the United States, I learned how to work well and to do things right at the first try; I worked in very cold winters and hot summers and for more than eight hours so I can stand on the line for long hours.”

I was struck by how much Ramiro told me in response to only one question. At that moment I thought that it was great for fieldwork but I was also puzzled. Later on, when I realized that he thought I worked for Volkswagen de México and thus was a “connection,” I understood why he had presented himself to me as an ideal (and almost a parody of an) autoworker: no talking on the lines, embracing harsh conditions of labor, the body merging with the machine. Instead of dismissing his self-presentation as a representation specifically geared towards me, I suggest that it illustrates how he retrospectively interprets his migrant experience as crafting him into a suitable worker for Volkswagen de México. Ramiro interprets working in construction and the harsh conditions he endured as the ground that shaped him into the ideal autoworker.

Through his experience, he has learned skills and has come to embody values: reliability, order, and efficiency. In his interpretation, his preference for working alone, a sense of alienation from his co-workers, is as an asset. Ironically, in the current context of ‘team-work’ and ‘workers’
participation’ at *Volkswagen de México* that encourages and rewards autoworkers for collaboration, Ramiro might find it difficult to embody the ideal Fordist worker.

Paty, Pepe, and Ramiro describe the ways in which they craft themselves into becoming suitable candidates for the factory. This crafting, however, is rather different from the ways in which companies discursively and ritually craft subjects (Kondo 1990; Kasmir 2001; 2004). Here, by contrast, people shape themselves actively to become suitable candidates for work at the factory *before* they ever apply for a job there. They actively work to come to embody the cultural, know-how, and skills thought to be necessary to work *Volkswagen de México*.

Working towards earning a college degree in a field that might be useful for getting a job at *Volkswagen de México*, learning German and English, and using one’s own economic means and time for self-transformation illustrate how the aspiration to work for the factory drives people in Puebla.

Aspirations, however, don’t thrive in a vacuum. They are the result of Volkswagen’s car economy, government policies, and development paths that for fifty years have transformed Puebla—and Mexico—into a hub for transnational car production. Aspirations are tangled with the hegemony of the car economy and its specific labor market. As such, these cannot be seen as expressions of individual agency. Instead, the car economy and its labor market “structure the possible field of action [and thus are a form of] power” (Foucault 1984: 428, cited in Wolf 1990:586-587). Whereas Michel Foucault examined how this form of power governs consciousness, anthropologist Eric Wolf, drawing on Foucault, examines how power structures political economy.

*Volkswagen’s* car economy is a structure of power shaping aspirations and projects of self-crafting. Thinking about the ways in which the car economy structures the field of action for people such as Paty or Pepe helps us see how consent to capitalism and its relations of inequality
are secured (Cahn 2006; 2008; Freeman 2007). It also illuminates how capitalist economic systems incite people to dream, aspire, and desire, engendering their commitment to the social relations of commodity production (Cross 2014; Ngai 2005). Volkswagen’s car economy as a structure of power shapes (and delimits) fields of action and it drives processes of accommodation within capitalism.

Aspirations, the crafting of the self, and accommodation in the car economy cannot be seen as following the rationale of the individual actor calculating her options and maximizing them, an embodiment of the figure of Homo economicus (Ong 2006). Accommodation must be seen in relation to how livelihoods are deeply connected to the car economy. To recall, if you are in the highest wage ranks or you are a white-collar worker, Volkswagen de México pays one of the best wages in Mexico. As Ramiro, the stranded migrant in Puebla who would like to return to the U.S., says: if he has to stay in Mexico, only at Volkswagen he can get a wage that is close to what he earned as a construction worker in the U.S. Paty too proves that her accommodation to capitalism does not just follow “economistic rationality” (Ganti 2014:99). To recall, she was offered a better-paid job and a higher position within Volkswagen de México. However, this would have meant to move to Silao, Guanajuato, where Volkswagen had just opened a new engine factory. Her motivation for turning down the position was that she didn’t want to move away from her family.

### 4.6 Volkswagen as the Locus of Possibilities

It is common for college students in Puebla to aspire to work for Volkswagen de México. The self-transformation in order to be a suitable candidate for work in the factory illustrates the hegemony of a labor market shaped by the car economy. However, this aspiration is also
connected to the imaginaries about *Volkswagen de México*. To this day, the factory continues to be described as a place that not only provides stable jobs but is also a medium for social mobility. In Puebla, those who are already working for the factory are described as the “lucky ones” (*suertudos*) (see also Rieger 2013:271).

Countless stories circulate about how *Volkswagen de México* and car production have transformed people’s lives. Although there are different versions, these stories generally suggest that working on the lines at *Volkswagen de México* means a house and a car and that a job at Volkswagen enables men to fulfill the social heteronormative roles of breadwinner, father, and husband. The typical story goes like this: A young peasant left his hometown (because he didn’t have land or because the sugar mill shut down). He ‘stole’ (i.e., eloped with) his girlfriend, moved to Puebla and found work at Volkswagen. He started as a janitor, moved through the ranks, and ended up working on the assembly lines. Working for Volkswagen in Puebla enabled him to climb the invisible ladder of social status, in this case from peasant without land to urban dweller with an industrial job. In a different version of this ideal type of Fordist prosperity and subject formation, working for *Volkswagen de México* prevented migration to the United States.

Regardless of the version, in this archetypical story of success, *Volkswagen de México* and wage labor are mediums that enable Mexican men to become middle class urban dwellers who own a house and a car. Working at *Volkswagen de México* confers status regardless of the position (worker on the line, unionized, white-collar worker, engineer, administrative staff, manager). *Volkswagen de México* in these stories is constructed as enabling a wide range of mobilities: from *campesino* (peasant) to *obrero* (worker), from the countryside to the city, as
well as class mobility and status (and sometimes access to a leased car and as such automobility).

Today the linguistic trace of this story of success is the local register of *la hizó* (“he made it”).

The story is full of assumptions. It works under the assumption that a sign of success is a) to live in the city, b) to become an industrial worker and, c) ownership of property and goods. These assumptions are not only the expression of an urban bourgeois system of values but they have also shaped the ideology of Mexico as a *mestizo* nation. Although none of my interlocutors ever evoked Mexico as a *mestizo* nation or interpreted Volkswagen as a medium for *mestizaje*, the story of *la hizó* is an echo and a residual trace that speaks to how the ‘modern’ Mexican subject should be: working with machinery in industrial production, involved in wage relations, living in the city, and consuming artifacts associated with the West such as cars or a watches (Gamio 1935). As noted in the Introduction, consumption, in his view, would furthermore mean the birth of new subjectivities. The social transformations connected to the presence of *Volkswagen de México* are also a project of imagination that is based on the production of exclusions, as well as labor and land exploitation.

In addition to its underlying assumptions, the story of *la hizó* also works through what it silences. Working for the factory enables a variant of the Fordist mode of consumption – the purchase of a car, a house, etc. This mode of consumption is only made possible by engaging in the Fordist mode of production: standing on the assembly lines, doing repetitive tasks, for forty-six hours a week, and accepting what car production does to the body. Workers describe their jobs as dangerous, especially when operating the large stamping presses (Rieger 2013:269). A worker narrated that “one feels very lonely, it is very cold…. It is dangerous and the work is

115 See Bachelor (2001) for a similar story of a man who left his *pueblo* in the highlands of Puebla and found a job at General Motors in Mexico City in the 60s.
hard, running at high pace” (ibid.). Mario, a retired Volkswagen worker who worked in the paint section between the 1970s and 80s described painting cars “as a very hard job and the paints were very strong; after each labor day, we washed our hands with our own urine because that was the only way the burning sensation would stop.”

As an attempt to “restrict disruptive turnover” (Rieger 2013:267), Volkswagen de México actively adopted practices of Fordist corporate paternalism. The factory offered wages at around twice the average local rate [and it] offered its employees attractive benefits such as membership in the national social security scheme, health insurance, paid vacation time, and from the eighties, help with school fees. Skilled workers received particularly good benefits that included a ‘gold fund’ consisting of a 10% income share that VW invested on for one year before paying it out. A thirteenth monthly salary at the year’s end also formed part of the remuneration for skilled employees.

While some of these “attractive benefits” are part of Mexico’s Labor Code and are thus connected to the policies of welfare capitalism, others such as “complementing wages with material goods [such as] free turkeys [in December, and] irons for workers’ mothers and wives, blankets, and toys for [workers’] children” (Rieger 2013:267) at Christmas are particular to Volkswagen de México. Nevertheless, these practices of corporate benevolence were not only forms of care but have also shaped belongings to the factory. Up to this day, these practices are

116 See Bernhard Rieger (2013:269) for a description of how laborers experienced the Fordist mode of production at Volkswagen de México. See Chapter Four and Five for conditions of labor today and how workers experience transformations brought by NAFTA.
still remembered and talked about and continue to reproduce an imaginary about Volkswagen de México.

4.7 Collective Effervescence

Although most of the stories that I heard were about men and how working for the factory transformed a man into a proletarian and a family man, there were also stories about women aspiring to work for the factory. Claudia, a married woman in her fifties, recalls how in 1970, when she was a student of Business Management, she was “filled with ilusión (excitement and hope) to work for this German company.” When I ask her why Volkswagen and not any other company or industry, Claudia tells me, “you could hear everywhere and read in newspapers that the company was looking for people.” Indeed, during those years, Volkswagen de México used newspaper ads not only to offer jobs on the line but also to look for accountants, secretaries, cooks, drivers, nurses, doctors, chemical engineers, and firemen.

Although Claudia didn’t end up working for the factory (she got married, moved to Mexico City, and only returned to Puebla for her retirement), her account is significant. Her recollection suggests that the arrival of Volkswagen was also eventful for a particular public: college educated people wanting to become white-collar workers. The factory also used another method to recruit its labor force: a Beetle that was driven around Puebla’s low-income neighborhoods (colonias populares) with a loudspeaker on top announcing jobs on the assembly lines.

Claudia’s promptness to share her memory with me illustrates the collective effervescence around the factory in Puebla. I had only just mentioned my research, and she not
only talked about her own aspiration to work for Volkswagen but also, as if giving me her approval for my project, added that “it is an important project because Puebla es Volkswagen.”

Claudia was not the only one with hopes and expectations about Volkswagen de México. She remembers that a friend of her father’s had aspired to manufacture screws for the factory. Although she does not know what the screws were for, she remembers that this man used to say that “if I could sell one thousand of these screws to la Volkswagen per month, ya la hice” (the subjunctive of la hizó).

Although these memories are idealized remembrances of the old days, they also hint at a sense of possibility – in the form of expectations, aspirations and hopes – that the arrival of Volkswagen to Puebla tapped into and created. In Claudia’s case, working for the factory would have been a way to put to work her acquired know-how and skills learned at Puebla’s public university, where many of the first generation of white collar workers and engineers earned their college degrees. In the case of her father’s friend, the arrival of Volkswagen to Puebla tapped into – and perhaps enhanced – his entrepreneurial aspirations.

Memories, stories, and their re-tellings in the present hint at the ways in which Volkswagen de México exists in an idealized and powerful manner. Over the years of car manufacturing, versions of la hizó or of how the arrival of the factory tapped into and created aspirations have constructed the factory as the locus of possibilities. However, the re-tellings of these memories and stories do not express the longing for a form of Keynesian-Fordist practices (Muehlebach and Shoshan 2012). How and when people recount these stories – with excitement and as soon as I mention my research on the factory’s presence in Puebla – aims at emphasizing and affirming the deep relationship between city and factory. But these stories are also the ground where the aspiration to work for Volkswagen de México is continuously engendered.
The aspirations of today, however, are different from those when the factory arrived. The difference lies in how *Volkswagen de México* has been constructed in these two moments and how the car economy has become entrenched in the city’s life. In the early days of the factory, *Volkswagen de México* was considered a medium that could fulfill a wide range of aspirations, and the arrival of the factory tapped into and engendered ambitions. Fifty years later, *Volkswagen de México* is still constructed as a medium to fulfill the aspiration of having a stable job, traveling, or leasing a car. Today’s college students—unlike those in the past—shape themselves actively to belong to *Volkswagen de México*. Although Pepe, Paty, and Ramiro are situated on different social strata based on income, occupation, and cultural as well as social capital via their different life histories, they illustrate how deep this aspiration runs to craft themselves into suitable candidates. The crafting of the self, however, doesn’t end once a job at the factory is obtained. To continue belonging to “the Volkswagen Family,” the “German work culture” must be cultivated and embodied.

4.8 “I Pretend that I’m Working Because You Pretend You Are Paying Me”

Octavio has been working for *Volkswagen de México* as an engineer for ten years, and his wife Andrea works for the Volkswagen Bank. Although the bank is located next to the factory, legally it is a separate entity: “in case there is a strike, the bank can continue operating.” Octavio and Andrea describe Germans as “very efficient, orderly, and they do their work ahead of time.” And, like Paty, they are cultivating in themselves these values and more precisely, a “German culture of work.”
Germans are described as working certain amounts of hours and remaining undistracted from their work during that period of time. They want to finish on time so they can have their *Feierabend*, which literally means ‘an evening of celebration’ and is a term widely used in Germany to refer to time off in the evening. Octavio has experienced the ‘German work culture’ personally. A few years ago, he was sent to Germany to take courses and to receive training. But while he was there, he also needed to keep up with his job demands in Mexico. Because of the time difference between Mexico and Germany, he was seven hours behind from his job in Mexico and thus tried to stay at the office when it was time for *Feierabend*. At 5 p.m. and, as people began leaving the office, he was told to leave as well. When asked if the office would be open during the weekend, Octavio was informed that “Germans don’t work on weekends.”

In her cultivation of ‘German values’, Paty also tries to be efficient in her work by arriving early and not getting distracted. Although she doesn’t want to work on weekends, she is not very successful. Paty and her boyfriend work for about 10 hours every day: they arrive at *Volkswagen de México* by 8 a.m. and leave after 6 p.m., because “there is always mucho trabajo (lots of work).” On weekends, they both work on their online Master’s degrees.

The existence of a ‘German work culture’ suggests that there is also a ‘Mexican culture of work.’ This is the culture of “*ahí se va*” – “the culture of careless work” (Juarez Nuñez 2006: 12) -which is how an economist who has written extensively on *Volkswagen de México* describes it. Germans are not only seen as doing every task efficiently and on time but also as caring about quality. The constructions of the two cultures of work are widely evoked to mark the differences between Mexico and Germany. In this construction, Mexicans are described as finding distractions while doing their work: chatting with co-workers, texting on their cell phones, or browsing on Facebook. Therefore, they have to stay longer hours at the workplace to finish their work or work on weekends. Based on the ‘German work culture,’ Andrea and Octavio say that
the idea that the longer hours you work the more you do—a widespread idea in Mexico—is a myth.

But if Mexicans can embody the ‘German work culture,’ Germans too can embody the ‘Mexican work culture.’ Octavio’s German boss has “switched to the Mexican way.” He now spends longer hours at work, sometimes more than Octavio, and works on weekends. Octavio is not sure if his boss is surfing the web or chatting during the working hours or if the amount of work is more than what can be accomplished in a day. When Germans embody Mexico’s ‘culture of work’ they are described (by Mexicans) as having been tropicalizado—a made-up adjective that stands for ‘tropicalized’ and partakes in a language of race and racialization. It is a racial construction that represents people living in tropics as not needing to labor because they can just pull fruits from trees (see ft 120). Although Mexicans do not consider themselves racists (Moreno Figueroa and Saldivar Tanaka 2016), the language of race or implicit assumptions about race permeate interactions in Mexico. In this particular case, it serves to distinguish between the supposed ‘efficiency of the German’ and the supposed ‘idleness of the Mexican.’

The drawback of Octavio’s boss being tropicalizado is that Octavio now feels obligated to stay with him even though he follows the “German work culture” in order to be able to leave early for home.

Culturalist interpretations and explanations about social relations between Germans and Mexicans are abundant. These are widely used by those employed at Volkswagen de México, by the factory as well as by academics (Pries 2000). These interpretations recall how, in the past, particularly within Rostow’s modernization theory of the 1960s, ‘culture’ and ‘worldviews’ were taken to be the cause of why certain countries were ‘undeveloped’ (Phillips 1998:xiii). Culture, in turn has also been evoked, to justify lower wages in Mexico. In Puebla today circulates the story that, when Volkswagen began manufacturing in 1967, Germans wanted to pay very high
wages. However, the story goes, the powerful trade union leader Blas Chumacero Sánchez didn’t let them for two reasons: a) Mexicans in other factories would begin asking for higher wages and, b) Mexicans didn’t need high wages because they only eat tortilla and chile.

Today culturalist interpretations, used to explain the social relations of car manufacturing at Volkswagen de México, suggest a ‘cultural clash’ while erasing the “structural power” (Wolf 1990:587) that impinges upon these social relations. This power structure is the global political economy of car manufacturing. To recall, wages in Mexico are the lowest within the context of global car manufacturing. Yet, employees and workers work about sixty hours a week. Broadly speaking and according to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Mexicans work five-hundred hours more per year than the people from the other thirty-five countries that belong to this organization. This is not only economic exploitation but also a relationship of domination enabled by the economic dependency on transnational corporations. At Volkswagen de México, this relationship is succinctly described by a unionized worker as: “Yo hago como que trabajo porque tu haces como que me pagas” (I pretend that I’m working because you pretend that you’re paying me).117

Culturalist interpretations of relations of exploitation and domination translate into the implementation of cultural solutions. To the new arrivals from Germany, Volkswagen de México

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117 This a common maxim in Mexico yet in the case discussed here it is used with particular connotations. According to Claudio Lomnitz, “the mestizo ranchers often project their own life of idleness onto that of Indians, thereby justifying exploitation: “Indians don’t have to work, they can just pull the fruits down from the trees […] Ellos hacen como que trabajan y nosotros hacemos como que les pagamos” (‘they pretend to work and we pretend to pay them’).” Indians are subsumed “to the order of nature, so that Indian products are seen not as he result of valuable human labor but as the product of nature” (Lomnitz 1992:75). This is a race construction and racialization with tangible effects as I showed in Chapter Three. In the case described above, while Mexican workers are constructed as cheap labor –by Germans and by the Mexican mestizo elite and rulers- this construction has been re-appropriated if not to challenge this racialized construction at least to criticize the relationships of exploitation that are informed by race constructions.
offers “intercultural seminars” which Lina explained to me as “not [being] about creating stereotypes or to judge but as an important way to understand the other culture.” The other solution consists of personnel that can act as a ‘bridge’ between “German culture” and “Mexican culture.” Lina’s husband is an engineer who ‘translates’ between ‘cultures.’ He did a three-year internship at Volkswagen de México when he was an engineering student, speaks Spanish fluently, and is married to a Mexican. At Audi Ingolstadt, he is in contact with Mexicans that are sent to Germany for training. When Audi began preparations for its new factory in Puebla, he, along with Lina and their two children, returned to Mexico for two years so he could ‘bridge’ the two ‘cultures of work.’ Later he once again returned to Mexico; this time alone for two more years to continue acting as a bridge.

Volkswagen de México is then seen as transforming the ‘Mexican work culture’ into a ‘German work culture.’ This view is not only held by people such as Lina and her husband or Octavio and his wife Andrea. Volkswagen de México as a medium to enable this transformation is a conception also promoted by the Mexican government. In 2011, the then Mexican President Felipe Calderón, while attending the first day of the Beetle’s production, stated that Volkswagen de México still offers Mexicans the opportunity to overcome the culture of “ya merito” – “not-quite-yet”--and to show that “Mexico has everything to be the great country, the winner nation that it is called to be” (Herrera Beltrán 2011).

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118 *Ya merito* roughly translates as ‘in a moment’ but it never refers to a specific moment in time; it could be in five minutes, tomorrow, or next month. Calderón’s statement calls for a change to a culture of the “here and now,” represented by German work habits. The Mexican President received the first 2012 New Beetle made in the VW factory on July 15th, 2011, and he inaugurated its production.
4.9 Silenced Histories of “The Volkswagen Family”

The cultural project that aims at cultivating a “German work culture” and eliminating “Mexico’s idiosyncrasies” (Pries 2000:47) such as “the culture of careless work” (Juarez Nuñez 2006:12), is not only a project centered on creating ‘bridges’ between ‘cultures,’ shaping workers in Volkswagen’s vocational training center, or by people such as Paty cultivating values that are promoted, understood, and associated with ‘German culture.’ This ‘cultural project’ is not confined to exhorting employees and workers to embody “German values” or to shaping people such as Lina’s husband to act as ‘translators of cultures.’ Neither is it simply exhorting those who work for the factory to belong to “the Volkswagen family.” The cultural project envisioned by Volkswagen de México and the Mexican government has been shaped by relationships of subjugation.

To illuminate the power relations that have impinged this cultural project, in this last section I sketch a moment from Volkswagen’s history in Mexico. Doing this also allows me to illustrate that while “The Volkswagen Family” is evoked to articulate inclusivity, care, and protection, ultimately the trope is constituted by histories of violence and force.

In 1992 during one of the most significant labor conflicts in the history of Volkswagen de México, the differences between the “Mexican work culture” and the “German work culture” were brought to the forefront. Within NAFTA’s negotiations and Volkswagen de México’s shift to “lean-production” to increase ‘productivity’ and ‘efficiency’ and to introduce ‘quality’ to Mexican workers, “the Volkswagen Family” was invoked. The shift to “lean-production” meant implementing “team-work,” “quality-circles,” and “just-in-time.” Through this shift, Volkswagen sought to transform itself from a multinational corporation with a peripheral plant in Mexico into “a transnational car producer with more uniform manufacturing standards” (Rieger
The importance of Volkswagen in Mexico now derived from Mexico’s membership to NAFTA.

Volkswagen’s cars manufactured in Mexico could now be exported to the United States, Canada, and the rest of the world, instead of being manufactured for Mexico and Central America. Current car models with the latest technology would be produced, a shift from manufacturing outdated car models using old machinery.

But this transformation also meant subcontracting and outsourcing. To do so, the new industrial park FINSA was constructed to house Volkswagen’s suppliers. Reorganizing production also meant the reorganization of labor relations. It transformed the social contract between non-unionized workers and the factory: from yearly contracts to monthly contracts (Vanderbush 1998). For unionized workers, seniority rights were replaced by another hierarchical system called escalafón (Juárez Núñez 1998) where workers would be evaluated annually and paid according to their know-how, skills, experience, efficiency, and attitude at work.

Regardless of the category, workers would now be called técnicos instead of trabajadores (working people) or obreros (blue-collar workers). The category of técnicos erases all traces of identification along class lines. A non-union employee called a “Coordinator” would lead teams and be supported by a unionized worker called a Facilitator. The relationship between teams and the coordinator would be organized as a relationship between clients and suppliers. The changes to implement “lean-production,” to gear the factory for

119 This label continues to change. In its 2012 Sustainability Report, Volkswagen de México uses técnico a few times and never “workers” or “employees” (empleados, white-collar worker). Instead, the preferred term is colaboradores which can be translated into English as collaborator, contributor, or team member.

120 The following account relies extensively on Healy (2008).
transnational car production and Mexico to become a global car producer “were not minor changes” (Healy 2008:121). SITIAVW – like other independent unions in the car manufacturing sector – had “won significant control over the production process (especially union participation in the determination of production rates, work force distribution within a plant and occupational health and safety measures), promotion procedures and employment security (including union participation in the elaboration of the personnel hierarchy and in workplace promotions and the progressive reduction of temporary employees [workers] in the work force. [As an independent union, SITIAVW was] more likely to strike than CTM affiliates although [this did not] produce large wage increases” (Middlebrook 1991: 278). With the shift to global car production, the union lost control and would no longer have a say regarding production processes, the work pace and preventive measures in high-risk areas (Juárez Nuñez 2006). The number of temporary workers would increase while the length of their contract would be shortened.

While negotiating a new collective agreement, the union’s General Secretary secretly signed another agreement with the directors of Volkswagen de México, accepting the shift in production and labor relation in exchange for a 20% wage increase, a high percentage when compared to increases in previous years at an average of 5%.

Since the agreement was signed in secret, it was not ratified by unionized workers in a General Assembly. However, details of the agreement made its way to a leftist newspaper, and its secretiveness and contents unleashed conflicts between Volkswagen and the independent union on the one hand, and 9,000 unionized workers out of a total workforce of 14,233 on the other hand. In a General Assembly outside of the factory, workers who disagreed with the agreement voted to remove the General Secretary and to render invalid the agreement since it had been made in secret.
In response to the swelling labor unrest, Volkswagen stopped production. This, in turn, was interpreted as a walkout, and was declared illegal by the Mexican government. However, throughout the month-long conflict, non-unionized workers and office staff continued working at the plant (Healy 2008:130). In appearance, there was a strike at the factory. As a result, the Ministry of Labor Relations ruled in favor of Volkswagen, which meant that the factory was not obligated to recognize individual and collective labor relations. *Volkswagen de México* used this legally granted right to fire 14,233 unionized workers and annual contract workers.¹²¹

On August 19, 1992, a large majority of the workers were allowed to return to the factory under a new collective agreement imposing work-teams, shifts of 11 hours, and after signing a document that stated that those who were re-hired had to give up their legal right (under labor law) to appeal the decision of the Ministry of Labor.¹²² That day, three hundred dissident workers organized a meeting outside of the factory. They were violently attacked by dogs and beaten by soldiers. Eleven of those laborers were arrested. The following day *Volkswagen de México* published in local and national newspapers the following paid insertion:

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¹²¹ The long time and prominent leader of the *Confederacion de Trabajadores de Mexico* (CTM) Fidel Velazquez described the decision of the Ministry as an “ominous and ill-fated precedent for the labor movement that might be repeated in other conflicts (Becerril 1992 cited in Healy 2008: 128). His assertion is telling. The CTM is one the three sectors composing the structure of the political party PRI, which is the party that Salinas de Gortari belongs to. Although the CTM, especially after the 1940s, attempted to keep a disciplined labor force, Velazquez’s assertion also reveals that neoliberal reforms also meant a schism between leaders of the same party related to generation and political and even educational trajectories and visions of Mexico.

¹²² These transformations were all part of neoliberal reforms in Mexico that had started in the 1980s but that were deepened under the presidency of Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994).
Figure 10: Volkswagen-sponsored newspaper insertion from 1992: “Home Sweet Home”

The caption reads:

Home Sweet Home: Unity once again strengthens our family. Now we will see, once again, the fruits of our talents, creativity, and imagination. We will hear again the movement of lines that transport parts, engines, and automobiles from one work group to the next. We will continue offering the result of our abilities and our efforts. It fills us with enthusiasm to return. But our biggest pride is to know that we continue to be a family: la gran familia Volkswagen (“the great Volkswagen family” bold letters in original, my translation).123

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123 The picture and the caption are from the newspaper La Jornada de Oriente, August 20, 1992.
This labor conflict restructured the triadic social contract between factory, workers, and the state. Under the new collective agreement, the mass meeting of unionized workers, the General Assembly, was eliminated. It foreclosed certain forms of workers’ political power, e.g., through the disappearance of intermediary union representatives who were replaced by Volkswagen’s appointed “leaders” (Juarez Nuñez 1998; 2006). The conflict set the precedent for how the Mexican government—and unions—would deal with future labor unrest by acting as the coercive arm of the corporation. As political scientist Teresa Healy argues, the 1992 conflict at Volkswagen de México illustrates the authoritarian and violent manner in which “lean-production” and NAFTA-related transformations were imposed as well as signaled a reformulation of “corporatism” in Mexico:

Whereas labor once played a role, albeit a constrained one, in adjustments and negotiations over setting the priorities within the government, in the 1990s official labor became not only a rubber stamp for agreements formulated at other levels in the state but the mechanism through which economic restructuring was imposed on the working class (Healy 2008:131).

The 1992 conflict and how it ended were part of a larger structural transformation that aimed at creating what then Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994) described as “a new labor culture” characterized by participation, dialogue, and no conflict.

To recall from the Introduction, multinational car production in Mexico has always been more than an economic project of national development. Industrial production and, in particular car manufacturing, has been one more “missionary” (Moreno 2003) enterprise to cultivate and teach the values of industrial capitalism and to bring prosperity and progress to the Mexican
worker (Bachelor 2001:276). Multinational car production is also a social and cultural enterprise. Yet, from the perspective of the Volkswagen worker, this cultural project of transformation means something different. As a female Volkswagen worker explained, “The Germans allegedly come to teach us something, but in reality they only take away the money we have earned” (cited in Rieger 2013:272).

The 1992 conflict illustrates that transforming “cultures of work” is not a smooth process of reminding workers that cars should be manufactured with “quality” – as many banners scattered around the factory today suggest. Nor is it about training Mexicans and Germans to be versatile in “two cultures” and to act as cultural translators. Rather, the language of culture to describe labor conflict or frictions at the factory obscures power relations and modes of subjugation and domination.

In the context of this chapter, the recollection of the 1992 conflict also aims at bringing to the forefront the physical and legal violence underlying “The Volkswagen Family.” The trope signifies (while also obscuring) the subjection of more than 14,000 laborers. After the 1992 conflict, the category of ‘trustworthy employees’ emerged. People in this category are college graduates and in many areas are replacing unionized workers. This conflict forms the conditions of possibility for people such as Paty to belong to “The Volkswagen Family.” Within this category, a select group receives benefits, such as Volkswagen contributing tuition payments for their post-secondary education. Simultaneously, the conflict also brought to the forefront the fragility of the collectivity “Puebla is Volkswagen.” This collectivity is tied to the optimum conditions for cheap manufacturing through a docile labor force.

The family trope articulates often-precarious and ambiguous belongings to the factory. Today, when the trope is asserted orally and through practices of corporate social responsibility, it articulates inclusivity, belongings, care, and a collectivity while simultaneously concealing
structures of inequality and exploitation. Juxtaposing the ways in which “the Volkswagen Family” has been constituted in the past and the present illuminates the double-edged nature not only of the family trope but also of Volkswagen’s car economy at large.

4.10 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown how “The Volkswagen family” is put to work by the factory and is inhabited by people in Puebla, along with the histories of violence that infuse the trope. The family trope is used to articulate relationships of care and expectations. Yet the trope is fragile. Although the trope doesn’t have a hold on everyone, its power lies not in how it is emphasized by the factory but in how today it is inhabited by a large number of white-collar workers.

“The Volkswagen Family” traces its lineage to early forms of industrial paternalism in which employees and workers were taken care of as the children of the company. It also traces its lineage to ideas and visions that connect nation and family. As I show in the Introduction, Volkswagen de México has, at different moments in time, been regarded as an engine of the nation’s progress, not only by providing jobs or enabling ‘economic growth’ but also by helping to build the nation. The trope also draws its lineage from the fifty years that the factory has been in Puebla. This is a significant number of years and for those who celebrate the factory, they signify commitment to the place and its people. While “The Volkswagen Family” is a collectivity with boundaries and shaped by inner fractures, it also signals rootedness in place.

If Volkswagen were to open its first factory in Mexico today, would the family trope be deployed? The answer is likely yes but significantly not for the reasons I have just described. While poverty, uncertain labor and living condition as well as precarity have been an enduring condition in Mexico, NAFTA and the years that have followed its implementation, have
accentuated and worsened these conditions. To recall, “The Volkswagen Family” was used, evoked and circulated in newspapers at moments of labor unrest and since, then when labor conditions are becoming more uncertain, the trope is used aggressively. It was at such moment when the obligations constituting the triadic social contract between state, corporation and workers had just been burst that labor relations became infused with a sentimental language and class identifications erased. Although the social contract is founded on hierarchical relations (Lomnitz 2005:328), prior to 1992, it unfolded and was embedded within state policies of social welfare and within a less-constrained labor movement.

The 1992 transformation at Volkswagen de México has made labor relations and labor conditions even more uncertain than they had been in the past. These conditions are not an exclusive feature of Volkswagen de México, but rather are the result of the restructuring that the conjuncture of NAFTA, “lean-production,” and Mexico’s full embrace of neoliberal policies have created. These conditions would be today the context in which Volkswagen would open its (hypothetical) first factory. Significantly, the memories and stories that people tell today as well as the imaginary about Volkswagen de México do give force to the factory. Yet, these don’t play a role in how “The Volkswagen Family” is articulated.

Practices of industrial paternalism are still implemented today. However, these practices do not encompass a collectivity but rather only chosen individuals within the factory. And, what it is given is also different. In the past, gifts such as toys, blankets, and turkeys were handed out. While these gifts aimed at preventing turnover, they were also “unproductive expenditures [and] ends in themselves” (Bataille 1985, cited in Taussig 1995:370). Paying the Master’s tuition of a select group of employees, by contrast, is not an unproductive expenditure but rather, as Paty herself describes it, aims to make her more efficient. It is the means to transform her into an efficient and loyal employee. This gift is part of a market economy of exchange that allows Paty
to continue crafting herself in the hopes of obtaining a secure and comfortable place within global capitalism.
Chapter 5

5 Crafting Solidarities

We – five Volkswagen unionized workers and I – are talking about the labor conditions at the factory. Sitting at a coffee shop in downtown Puebla, José, a unionized worker for thirty-seven years, is telling us about the labor conditions on the assembly lines. “There are 2,500 workers under monthly contracts, and tensions between them and unionized workers are on the rise.” He adds that those under monthly labor contracts – known as eventuales, a term used to refer to temporary workers – try to impress coordinators (non-union supervisors) in the hopes of making it into the ranks of Volkswagen’s unionized labor force, or at least getting paid overtime.

Tensions arise between unionized workers and eventuales when the latter assemble parts faster, creating work overloads for unionized laborers and eventuales alike.

The most pressing problem, in José’s opinion, is that eventuales “don’t know anything about class struggle (lucha de clases) and [since] they don’t know any better, [they] try to keep what [they] have instead of [having] nothing.” Although José often puts emphasis on the impossibility of class struggle as the result of ignorance, he also acknowledges that eventuales are not unionized and thus their labor situation is uncertain: they are afraid of losing their jobs.

Fear, uncertainty and the precarious position within the factory structure intersect in silencing workers under monthly contracts. However, according to José, the spirit of class struggle is not found among unionized workers either. In this sense, there is a similarity between workers under monthly contracts and the unionized workers in the highest wage ranks: They equally don’t care about what happens to the rest of the labor force. Antagonisms and frictions between unionized and non-unionized workers – including subcontracted ones have produced what my interlocutors
call *la clase fracturada*—“the fractured class”—characterized by disunity, apathy, and a lack of class-consciousness that renders impossible any kind of effective class struggle. In the current context of car production, José explains, “Everyone is in it for themselves” (*cada quien con sus propios intereses*).

In this final chapter, I examine how a group of five Volkswagen workers work together to remedy “the fractured class.” While these five workers are certainly not representative of the entire Volkswagen workforce—for one, all of them are unionized, male, and politically active inside and outside the factory—focusing on them offers insight into common grievances at *Volkswagen de México*, and into their attempts to challenge the labor conditions at the factory. The conjuncture of NAFTA’s labor restructuration, neoliberal reforms that have reconfigured state-society relations, and global transformations in car production have taken particular forms on the assembly lines and shape everyday interactions on the lines, the relations among workers, as well as their modes of struggle. Intense calls for “productivity” and “competition” coupled with uncertain labor conditions and the reliance of car manufacturing on unionized, nonunionized, and subcontracted nonunionized workers have eroded a sense of recognition among the workforce and have created fragmentation. To overcome the fragmentation among the workforce, my interlocutors actively seek to cultivate “class-consciousness” (*conciencia de clase*) as the pre-condition for creating a sense of solidarity amongst and between the workers.

I elucidate how my interlocutors diagnose, discuss, and interpret the disunity among workers. Doing so offers a window into the labor conditions and social life on the assembly lines at *Volkswagen de México* as well as the role of the union in producing “lack of conscience” (*falta de conciencia*). To cultivate “class-consciousness,” the five workers are invested in finding ways to address a heterogeneous labor force and reaching beyond factional divisions, forms of identification, and personal interests. Some of their methods are shaped by union politics, but
they are not contained by them. They also draw on a wide range of other political ideas and visions that offer alternative methods to carry out political struggles. As we will see, in doing so, they have created an alternative grammar to address a fragmented labor force and craft solidarity that, while very much within the Marxist tradition, is constituted by the visceral and experiential rather than the language of “labor rights.” Although their attempts at cultivating “class-consciousness” follow the Marxist tradition of “awakening,” they also disrupt it. Awareness is cultivated viscerally. Like anthropologists, my interlocutors are interested in finding out “how do industrial workers develop a common political consciousness, given their social fragmentation in the capitalist labor process?” (Mollona 2009:xxiii).

Anthropologists have shown that working-class consciousness and identity are not a given nor static; rather they are always in the making (Kasmir 2001; 2004; Kearney 1996; Nash 1978). They have shown how other forms of identification—gendered, ethnic, racial, and religious, among other forms—shape political consciousness. According to Gramsci, “[Working class] identities are the result of structural, ideological, and historical forces […] Identity formation [is] a product of human agency and interventions” (Snodgrass 2003:5). Drawing on Gramsci, Stuart Hall argues that identities are “a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’” (Hall 1990:225).

In their attempts to cultivate working-class consciousness and identity, this group of workers draws on accounts of the inequalities and exploitation inherent in the industry’s structural conditions, their own political leanings, including a Marxist understanding on the world, and on the particular historical capitalist and neoliberal moment in which their lives unfold and shape their social relationships with workers on the line. To cultivate working-class consciousness and identity, they draw on the bodily states and experiences of being on the line.
While my interlocutors are resisting the labor conditions created by NAFTA, “lean-production”, and the union as a depoliticizing institution, more significantly they are also resisting the fragmentation of the labor force that this conjuncture has created. Competitiveness, productivity, individualism, the uncertain labor conditions of a large number of workers, relations of inequality and domination—all part of this conjuncture—have not only fragmented the labor force but also foreclosed certain forms of workers’ political power. Simultaneously, this conjuncture has opened the conditions to imagine alternative forms of self-organization and collective action outside of the typical trade unionism (Ness 2014). It also offers the conditions of possibility to carry out a political struggle at the factory while circumventing the union. This conjuncture has opened the possibility to create a collage of political inspirations as well as creation of connections to local and global networks, and connections to a wide range of struggles within and outside of Mexico.

My interlocutors’ practices are a “diagnostic of power” (Abu-Lughod 1990:42; italics in original). In other words, I don’t examine them for their effectiveness (or lack thereof) against systemic forms of power. Rather, their practices index the conditions in which workers respond to, operate, organize, and imagine the futures of labor and social relations among the workforce within a field of power. Volkswagen workers are caught in forms of power and exploitation that are simultaneously local, national, and global.

Ethnographically, in what follows, I focus on the bi-monthly meetings of these five workers to elucidate how they gather and discuss information about labor conditions, and how they produce knowledge about these conditions and the union. Examining the car economy from the vantage point of workers’ grievances and critiques, I offer another perspective from which to understand the presence of Volkswagen in Puebla. As a means to introduce them, I describe their heteroglossic and, at times, clashing politics that reach beyond the factory grounds. These
politics shape their practices, their visions of solidarity, and the relationship among workers that they aspire to create. Elucidating their politics aims to avoid what anthropologist Sherry Ortner identifies as “the problem of ethnographical refusal” in resistance studies (1995). According to Ortner, these studies tend to only focus on the politics of resistance and the relationship between dominant and subordinate. In pursuit of this, they omit the lived social worlds that also inform, infuse, and shape “resistance.” In doing so, these studies dissolve the subject – the intentions, desires, projects [and fears] (ibid: 190) of those who engage in resistance. Those who resist, as Ortner argues, have their own politics, oscillate between identities, and are also embedded in their own internal conflicts and power asymmetries.

After describing the group’s grievances against the factory and the union, I turn to the different visions that inform their activism. By teasing out the politics of the five workers, I shed light onto their political leanings to provide a portrait of each of my interlocutors. The picture that emerges is one of an incompatible group that at times displays a paternalistic attitude, oftentimes even dismissive, towards the labor force. Their internal conflicts are not only the result of clashing politics but also of generational conflicts and, most importantly, struggles for authority between working class males. However, their meetings are a window into how, despite tensions and their attitude, the five workers practice the solidarity, concern for workers, collective action, and compañerismo (comradeship) – in a visceral and embodied sense – that they aspire to. In their ways of being together and through their practice of addressing a heterogeneous and fragmented labor force, this group of workers re-imagines social relationships among male workers at Volkswagen’s assembly lines. To evoke the solidarity that they perform and aspire to (and to protect their anonymity), I call this group “the five compañeros.”
5.1 The Labor Condition

It is February 15, 2011. I’m at a coffee shop with Octavio, a unionized worker for 23 years, waiting for the other four compañeros. We don’t have to wait long. Arriving at our table are José and Andres – unionized workers for 37 years and 24 respectively. The men shake hands and with their left hands touch each other’s shoulders, a gesture that indicates a more affectionate greeting. I receive a handshake from each and, as every time since the day we met a few months ago, a kiss on the cheek. It is a few minutes past 9 a.m., and José and Andres apologize for their tardiness, saying that it was difficult to find a parking spot. Octavio tells them not to worry since Marco and Ramírez – unionized workers for 25 and 45 years respectively- will be late too as they worked the third shift, which ended at 3:30 a.m. 124

As we wait for the other men to arrive, Octavio asks José if he has time on Wednesday to receive the caravan from the autonomous municipality of San Juan, Copala in downtown Puebla. 125 José can’t; he will be working the afternoon shift. The arrival of Marco and Ramírez puts an end to the conversation. The greeting ritual takes place one more time. The latest two arrivals grab seats at the table, facing each other. The waiter arrives and we all order beverages: Americanos for all except for the late arrivals. Marco and Ramírez order mezcal, a strong agave liquor which, as they say, will help them wake up. As the waiter walks away from our table, Octavio puts a mini laptop on the table, and José, Andres, Ramírez, Marco, and I put our notebooks and pens on the table. I ask if I can turn on my recorder; they all agree. Octavio asks

124 These names are pseudonyms.
125 This caravan was called El Color de la Sangre and it was a medium to denounce the presence of paramilitary groups (MULT-PUP and UBISORT-PRI) in the autonomous municipality of the Triqui Nation from Copala, Oaxaca. Drawing on Zapatista politics, they have created an autonomous municipality. The caravan arrived on May 24, 2011. Members of El Frente de Pueblos de la Tierra y el Agua, Region Puebla (Chapter Three), Octavio and his partner, as well as other activists groups from Puebla, received the caravan with food, water, and all the necessary supplies to set up at camping ground in Puebla’s main plaza el Zócalo.
the group about the labor situation in their work areas and what the focus of this meeting should be.

A brief moment of silence is followed by a long and familiar list of grievances. José begins to speak: There is a rumor that in Nave 8 Volkswagen wants to increase “automatization.” Based on previous experiences, this means the retirement of compañeros (co-workers), framed as “voluntary”. Workers are worried and a number of workers from Nave 6 – where the (new) Beetle is manufactured – haven’t yet had an evaluation to determine their wage level. This system, imposed after the 1992 labor conflict as part of transformations related to “lean-production” and to eliminate the “Mexican work culture”, appears to be a mechanism to foster competition as well as cheapen labor. That there are compañeros without an evaluation confirms, once again, that evaluations are random.

Next on the list is a grievance about the time when the third shifts ends: 3:30 a.m., an hour of the night when there is no public or factory transportation. This is interpreted as a tactic used by the factory to make workers who do not have a car to work overtime until 6:30 a.m., when public transportation starts running in Puebla. Although overtime pay is double than regular hours, workers sometimes prefer going home earlier to sleep. Relatedly, workers are discussing how rotating the three different shifts every four days is taking a toll on their bodies; the older they are the more they feel the imbalance (descompensar) that it causes in their health and well-being. José ends the list by stating that the executive committee is instilling temor (fear) of losing their jobs in the eventuales. “Fear”, José tells us, “is the best weapon to encourage eventuales to be productive and to keep them quiet.”

126 Descompensar is a medical term to describe unbalances in the body.
I heard this list of grievances often during my fieldwork with the five compañeros: work overloads, fear as an instrument of “productivity” and to discipline the workforce and force them to accept unequal conditions of labor, increased “productivity” that translates into speeding up the tempo on the assembly lines, and competition– and tensions– among workers, tensions between coordinators and workers, ‘voluntarily’ retirement, exhausted bodies etc. This list offers a glimpse into the labor situation at Volkswagen de México and into what my interlocutors call los abusos de la planta (“the abuses of the factory”). These abuses also offer another vantage point on the visceral landscape around Volkswagen de México: the role of fear in car production. “Fear” on the lines is part of the regimes of affect infusing and shaping the car economy and its relations of domination and subjection.

In the context of labor restructuring, “lean production,” and calls for “productivity,” these “abuses” and grievances are common (Babson 1995; Juárez Núñez 1998). Though widely experienced among Volkswagen’s labor force, these “abuses” are rarely articulated openly. Instead, coordinators, the factory’s official channels of communication, and even the union describe each of these practices as the “needs of the company.” At the meetings with the compañeros, when the ambience felt heavy and grim after going through the list of “abuses”, a compañero would sometimes break the spell by injecting some humor and re-shifting the meaning of “needs”: “If la Volkswagen is constantly changing production rhythms and changing workers’ vacations according to its needs, then workers should respond by saying that going to the bathroom is a physiological need.”

My interlocutors describe the factory’s abuses as the effects of labor restructuring and the transformation of labor relations that followed the 1992 labor conflict. However, some of these abuses have existed since the early days of Volkswagen de México or even since the onset of industrialization. For example, car production’s reliance on eventuales has been the norm in
Mexico since the early days of car manufacturing. However, prior to 1992, contracts were for two years. Since 1992, eventuales are hired under monthly contracts, which can be extended or revoked according to the demands of “productivity” (Vanderbush 1998:260) (Gonzalez García and Juárez Nuñez 1998: 448 ft 6). “Productivity” is also contingent on the global economic context, as was made clear during the financial crisis in 2008. While this “crisis” continues to be described as solely affecting the U.S., Canada, and Europe, its effects were also felt in places such as Mexico, where U.S., European, and Asian car manufacturers have factories. Car production slowed down, which meant that many monthly contracts were not renewed. After the 1992 conflict, moreover, the number of unionized workers on the lines has steadily decreased (Vanderbush 1998:260). At Volkswagen de México, there are eventuales who have been living with the uncertainty and precarity of monthly contracts for eight years. Rotating workers in three shifts to produce cars twenty-four hours a day, moreover, is an example of the type of conditions, Karl Marx argues that have been a key mechanism to appropriate labor since the Industrial Revolution (1990b:367).

The lack of bathroom breaks is still in line with the Fordist mode of production. However, its consequences have been reconfigured. Prior to 1992, when workers needed to go to the bathroom, they asked a co-worker to cover them and to “double-up.” After 1992, the conjuncture of a Taylorist system of production, the uncertain labor situation, increased demands for “productivity,” and a non-unionized coordinator that supervises team groups, “doubling-up” (dobleterar), José explains, has suggested “unconscious improvements.” In looking for ways to make the line more “efficient” – reducing assembling time and the number of workers at once – coordinators are constantly looking to increase productivity without raising the cost. If they manage to do so, they get a bonus. “Doubling-up” in this context is a double-bind: If a worker asks another worker to cover up while going to the bathroom, the coordinator may notice and
realize that he could cut one of these workers from the line without affecting productivity, which can easily be achieved if the worker is an eventual. If a worker is cut off, the remaining workers now have to do more work. Once in a while, workers collectively challenge the attempts to cut the number of workers. At these moments, workers boo the team leader and call him a “traitor.”

The contentious labor situation goes beyond frictions among workers and a relationship of exploitation and domination with the factory. The current union is also accused of being complicit with the factory in depoliticizing workers. In local media discourse, the Volkswagen’s union SITIAVW is often held up and praised as one of the few unions that doesn’t belong to the CTM – the powerful union institution in Mexico with which many workers are affiliated (or are forced to affiliate) and which often acts as the coercive arm of the state and factories. After breaking from the CTM in 1972, SITIAVW affiliated to Unidad Obrera Independiente (UOI Independent Workers Union) (Middlebrook 1989:72). After the 1992 conflict, it switched to become part of FESEBES (Federación de Sindicatos de Empresas de Bienes y Servicios), a labor federation that emerged in the 1990s. This labor federation represents workers from the privatized state companies and parastatal corporations (Healy 2008: 133).127 “FESEBES”, which supported the neoliberal policies implemented by Salinas de Gortari such as privatization and free trade “emerged in direct opposition to the CTM” (ibid). Its creation also signaled a struggle between two generations, power factions, and visions of capitalist development: the old cronies of the ruling party PRI, known in Mexico as the “dinosaurs” – because they have ruled Mexico

127 Founding members of this new labor federation were from the Sindicato de Telefonistas (Telephone workers), the Sindicato Mexicano de Electricistas (Electrical workers), Sindicato Tecnicos y Manuales de la Produccion Cinematografica (Film technicians), Alianza de Tranviarios de Mexico (Transportation Workers), and the Asociacion de Sobrecargos y Pilotos de Aviacion (Airline Workers). When this new federation was created, it had 100,000 members (Healy 2008:133).
for so long— and the younger generation of “economists trained at Harvard, MIT, Yale, and the University of Chicago” (Babb 2001:1).

The complicity between the union and the factory is not only signaled by the silencing of how the restructuring in 1992 created frictions and antagonisms among the workforce or by the lack of protest against intensive pushes for more “productivity.” It is also signaled by what my interlocutors call la desinformación (disinformation). Rather than referring simply to false information, my interlocutors use this term to indicate that there is “too much information” disseminated through the union’s communication channels – Boletín Informativo Sindicato Independiente and Poder Sindical (POS). This information and the sheer amount of it not only preclude the dissemination of “important information” about labor conditions on all the manufacturing areas, workers’ grievances, labor conditions, and efforts to unionize in the maquiladoras supplying Volkswagen de México. The most significant effect of la desinformación is that it “adormece la conciencia” (deadens awareness). Let me now unpack what desinformación means.

5.2 The Channels of Disinformation

The union’s two official communication channels, Boletín Informativo and Poder Sindical (POS), offer much practical information. Through Boletín Informativo, for example, workers are informed about where to leave their overalls so the company that washes them can pick them up. It is published anytime there is information that the union deems important to communicate to the labor force. Its aesthetics are simple. It is made of thin recycled paper and printed in black
The bulletin is addressed to *todos los compañeros y compañeras sindicalizados* (all unionized laborers), but it seems that laborers under monthly contracts also receive it.

It is the SITIAVW magazine. According to José, the original inspiration for the magazine was a magazine called *El Obrero Mundial* (The Global Laborer). However, in recent years the magazine has not only changed in content and appearance but also changes its name every six years. The union committee that wins the elections re-names the magazine with its name. The committee that won last elections was *Poder Sindical*. 

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ink. The five *compañeros* do find some of the information provided in the bulletin useful, such as explanations of how tax withholding works. However, this is still “official information,” sanctioned by the factory.

The magazine POS, *Poder Sindical – Organo de Difusión e Información* (Union Power: Medium to Disseminate Information), consists of reviews of events organized by the union, which is also practical information, and short articles that vary according to the season. Its presentation sets it apart from *Boletín Informativo*. The cover is made of glossy paper, followed by about twenty pages in black and white. For my interlocutors, the aesthetics of POS are revealing. Glossy paper, the use of color pictures on the cover and the number of pages are read as indicating high printing costs which indicates to them that workers’ contributions are spent frivolously. Even though POS is a medium of communication, it is described as having “no content.” To provide me with examples, José presented me with seven POS issues that were scattered in his car’s trunk. He couldn’t give me more, he said, because “I throw them in the garbage.”

My small sample includes issues from 2008, 2009 and 2011. Each cover page indicates the season: a Christmas Tree, a large puppet indicating Children’s Day, an old black and white picture of an assembly line, or for the July 2008 issue, the month when wage increases were negotiated, a picture of the *comision revisora* (the commission formed to negotiate the increase with the factory). Other covers are more striking. In the March 2011 issue, the cover is a collage...
of pictures depicting wrestlers, children disguised as clowns, and a young woman wearing a pink and black bikini. The pictures were taken at the Three Kings’ celebration in January 2011. For this festival, the union rented Puebla’s baseball stadium, hired clowns and twenty-six wrestlers, accompanied by young bikini-clad women, as a spectacle for unionized workers and their families.

All the issues feature a message by the SITIAVW General Secretary at that time, Victor Jaime Cervantes Rosas. Cervantes Rosas’ message in the March issue is different from the others in my sample. Addressing “all workers belonging to SITIAVW,” he thanks the more than 10,000 workers including their families who attended the event. As he writes, “this number [of attendees] makes us commit every day to offer the best to the Volkswagen family.”

Perusing different issues of POS, I learned about events organized by the union and the content of the magazine: a Women’s Day celebration for the unionized female workforce, a Mother’s Day event featuring a singer who is described in the magazine as “a bit aggressive towards men”; a Father’s Day event featuring a group of bikini-clad women singing and dancing. The article themes are also varied: “Development of the automotive industry in Mexico”, “Don’t touch the piggy bank”, which offers suggestions to workers for maintaining their savings, and “Healthy and Beautiful Forever” (with the title written in English), among others. The magazine’s content revolves around the same themes: health, how to take care of your wages, how to spend the end-of-the-year bonus, spectacles and events, jokes and quotes by famous people, and practical information such as a new bus route or information sessions about
INFONAVIT credit (Instituto del Fondo Nacional de la Vivienda para los Trabajadores), a government credit that helps unionized workers to buy a house or an apartment.  

In the eyes of the five compañeros, most of the information that the union provides through its official channels is rather useless. The magazine is “a waste of paper.” For Marco, it is a “big business” since the union makes money via advertisements. But they also believe that the factory “contributes” to pay for the magazine. Together, this information is key to creating la desinformación.

Once in a while, there are exceptions to POS’s general mode of disinformation. An article entitled “The Federal Government unfairly takes over workers’ resources” denounces how, since the pension system was modified in 2001 during the administration of Vicente Fox Quesada (2000-2006), 20,000 million pesos “produced by the sweat and effort” of hundreds of Mexicans have “disappeared.” The article is a preamble to the denunciation of a similar appropriation to which workers at Volkswagen de México have been subjected. The same administration is accused of not recognizing “the surplus (excedentes) of 100 million pesos [coming from the tax that the government applies to the income of workers, employees, companies, and businesses during the tax period of 2004-05].” Another article, titled “ Outsourcing: the legal illegality in our country,” criticizes the Mexican government and companies for outsourcing. However, it never mentions that outsourcing is an entrenched practice at Volkswagen de México.

Another article describes labor struggles in Europe. Entitled “They should pay for their own crisis! Out with the 65-hour administration! Solidarity with the Struggle!,” the article, which has been downloaded and pasted from kaosenlared.net, a Spanish website, reports that the

\footnote{This credit is part of the benefits that the Mexican government offers to workers and employees if their workplaces are affiliated with this government institution.}
Ministry of Labor of the European Union approved to increase labor time from 48 hours to 65 hours. This modification is not based on “collective agreements” but “individual agreements” between a worker and the company. Even though the article is about labor conditions in Europe, the last sentences directly address Volkswagen’s unionized workforce: “This is the reality that should keep us united in absolute solidarity with our Union and its Committee. The times of divisions must be surpassed in light of the new and atrocious reality that looms over the working class.”

Unlike reviews of the events that the factory organizes or articles about health and well-being, the five compañeros find the aforementioned articles to be information with “content.” However, such content-rich information only appears when union elections are on the way, or when the union and Volkswagen de México are negotiating the annual wage increase. At such moments, and only such moments, sentences such as, “today we are living a struggle against two giants, Volkswagen de México and the government, and that is why, compañeros, we have to be united” appear in POS.

At these particular moments, the union, José explains, “shows off its Marxism” (le sale lo Marxista). Another example of this display is from July 2008, a month before the wage-increased negotiations began. The section dedicated to well-known personalities is devoted to “Karl Heinrich Marx Pressburg.” A short biography, a sketch of Marx’s face, and sixteen famous lines, some from the Communist Manifesto, are published. José points out that sentences such as “Laborers have nothing to lose except their chains” and “Political power is simply the organized power of a class to oppress another” to highlight the remarkable shift in content and language, nothing how at particular times, POS uses a lenguaje combativo (combative language) by writing about exploitation or class struggle and by constructing Volkswagen de México as the oppressor while blurring the union’s complicity in that oppression.
Besides reporting on the labor situation in the *maquiladoras* that supply to Volkswagen, the five *compañeros* want the union’s magazine to be a medium to educate workers about labor rights. But more than anything, exchange information about actual labor conditions at *Volkswagen de México* and the everyday realities of work on the assembly lines. Their bi-monthly meetings at coffee shops are an attempt to fill that gap. Gathering information and documenting and recording labor conditions and the social relations among the workforce are ways in which they counter *la desinformación*.

### 5.3 Collecting Evidence

In their bi-monthly meetings, the *compañeros* exchange and discuss information as a way of actively working against *desinformación*. The information they gather and the knowledge it produces contrasts with the information that circulates via the union’s magazines. Information is gathered by the five *compañeros* and by about thirty other workers who, although they know about the bi-monthly meetings, don’t always attend. These quasi-fieldworkers go around to the warehouses where cars are being manufactured by more than 10,000 workers (unionized, *eventuales*, and subcontracted workers) in three shifts, twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week. They walk an area of three hundred square meters moving between warehouses, assembly lines, and cafeterias, with the risk of being reported by coordinators because they are not in their assigned workplace. Surveillance cameras also increase their chances of been caught. They don’t know all the workers at the factory – an impossible task given the large number – but much of the information about labor conditions and social relations in the workforce travels orally and through “trusted” channels. Although the five *compañeros* are committed to reaching out to the heterogeneous workforce, I never met any female, *eventual*, or subcontracted worker who was
involved in their group. Once in a while, a worker reported that a *compañera* (her name was given and recorded) had passed along information, but women were never directly involved.

Gathering information and sharing it at the bimonthly meetings is a political act. The information exchanged and discussed is constantly disrupting the image represented by the family trope or the celebratory narrative promoted about *Volkswagen de México*. It is evidence of exploitation, subjugation, domination, and inequalities and how structural frictions and antagonism are created and lived every day on the assembly lines. It is also political, because in Puebla speaking against the factory is an attack on the collectivity “We are all Volkswagen.”

More importantly, the workers gathering information run the risk of being fired. A few years ago, in the local newspaper *La Jornada de Oriente*, several notes on the labor conditions at the factory were published under the pseudonym of *Obrero Crítico* (critical worker). Soon after they appeared, they stopped. The five *compañeros* believe that either the factory found out who the worker was and fired him, or that the company threatened the newspaper with the withdrawal of its car advertisements if the publication continued.

The five *compañeros* are already on the radar of managers, Human Resources officials, and the union as “discontented workers” (*trabajadores discontentos*) and “unruly” and “rebellious” (*revoltosos*). Although their meetings are not clandestine as they are held in public spaces, a secretive atmosphere still permeates them. Abrupt silences and the lowering of voices when a waiter approaches mark the tense ambiance. Octavio explained this to me after making a subtle movement with his hand towards his mouth, to indicate to Ramírez (who was talking at that moment) to stop talking or change the topic. “The factory has many ears,” is how this gesture was explained to me; “you never know who is listening.” I found this secretiveness a bit puzzling: they kept a detailed account—including names—of grievances, discontented workers, and the “abuses of the factory.” What would the consequences be if these materials ended up in
the wrong hands? And why did they allow me to be there at their meetings and record the same information they guarded so carefully? The five compañeros wanted accuracy and they often went back to their own notes from previous weeks. As for my presence: they not only trusted me but also saw me as a kind of ‘international stage,’ which, as I will show shortly, is a platform they are used to and take advantage of.

Very sporadically, meetings were also held at other Volkswagen workers’ homes on Sundays. At these meeting more workers attend, perhaps because a worker’s house is less public than a coffee shop. The difference between the meetings in homes and those at coffee shops was noticeable. In addition to drawing more workers, the attendees of these meetings are also more cheerful and joke amongst themselves. Since these meetings are early Sunday morning, tamales, warm corn drinks (atole), and lots of coffee are offered for breakfast and served by the worker’s children and wife.

The information gathered in these meetings is written and re-written in notebooks, and then typed on Octavio’s computer to be repeated again in future meetings. When I was present, the same information was also recorded in my notebook and in audio form to be re-written as fieldnotes. We all were constructing our own forms of evidence about the labor conditions at Volkswagen de México.

5.4 A Bricolage of Political Visions

In light of how, over the years, most union committees at Volkswagen de México have prioritized the factory’s “needs” over workers’ rights, the five compañeros are conflicted about union politics. All of them believe that the union is an important institution for countering the power of the factory and that the union should be at the forefront of social struggles instead of just factory
struggles. However, Andres, Marco, and Ramírez see union politics as the only possibility while Octavio and José reject the idea of a centralized form of power that the union represents. Both of them are more skeptical about the transformative power of the union. They think, as do many in Mexico, that “el poder te emborracha” (power makes you drunk).

Nevertheless, in 2011, the five compañeros were working on a plan to participate in the election of a new union committee. They called this plan el proyecto. “The project,” however, was not a straightforward result of factory and union politics. Instead, it was constituted by a wide range of political inspirations and engagements, informed by connections and dialogues with different groups in Mexico and abroad, and by conflicting ideas about “power.” It is in the crafting of this project that my interlocutors negotiate amongst themselves how union politics and struggles for solidarity should be carried out.

The political inspirations of the five compañeros could not be more disconnected from each other and oftentimes they clash. These inspirations are heteroglossic and they reach beyond the factory grounds. Their politics shape their practices, their visions of solidarity, and the relationship among workers that they aspire to create. In what follows, I dwell on their political leanings as way to introduce them.

Octavio and José openly talk about their sympathies for and inclinations towards Zapatista politics – Ejercito Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN), the revolutionary group that since 1994 has demanded indigenous autonomy in Mexico and struggled against capitalism and neoliberalism. EZLN is also El Frente’s source of inspiration (Chapter Three).

Drawing from the EZLN, Octavio and José believe that social transformation challenging the status quo must start “from below.” Like the leaders of the EZLN, both men are wary of “taking power.” In the context of union politics, this wariness translates into their ambivalence towards becoming a union committee. At times when the project of forming a committee to run
in union elections was discussed, Marco, Andres, and Ramírez pointed out to José and Octavio that their critique of the factory is extensive “but when there is the possibility to gain power,” their critiques subside.

When Octavio and José are not working on the lines or meeting with their compañeros, they participate in larger events that question and push back against the economic system and the state’s authority. Octavio calls himself an activist. I often ran into him and his partner Alicia at events organized by the movement *No Mas Sangre* (No More Blood), which demanded that the Mexican government put a stop to the war on drugs unleashed by the then president Felipe Calderón. I also ran into them at events organized by *El Frente*. In fact, I met Octavio through Juan, the spokesperson from this peasant/activist group that I discussed in Chapter Three. I mentioned to Juan that I was having trouble finding Volkswagen workers to talk to, even though Puebla is full of them. He gave me a cell phone number – but not a name --and told me to say that Juan has sent me. After the call, I still didn’t know the worker’s name but we had arranged to meet early in the morning in a park in downtown Puebla. During our first encounter, he asked what I was doing in Puebla, why I was doing research on Volkswagen, and why I was interested in talking to workers. Only at the end of this first meeting did Octavio tell me his name. An avid photographer, he always has his Cannon camera hanging from his neck at the events he attends.

José and his wife Lola, a retired teacher, collect food and money for workers on strike. He is also vocal about his leanings towards Zapatista politics and uses the Marxist language of class struggle and capitalism. During my fieldwork, José and Lola were reading *Capital I* with a reading group. But his introduction to Marxism had happened thirty years earlier when he first started working at Volkswagen de México. He met students from Oaxaca who invited him to

131 Calderon’s war on drugs is called the “Merida Initiative.”
participate in study circles. With them, he says, he “understood the destiny of workers and the need to unite.” José has a daughter who studied Anthropology at Puebla’s public university Universidad Autonóma de Puebla (UAP) and today works for an NGO in Oaxaca facilitating the exportation of fair trade coffee by indigenous people. Of the five compañeros, José seems to be the only one who enjoys taking time off with his partner. Together, they like to visit a place with thermal waters in the neighboring state of Hidalgo. And yet, unlike the other four men, José has never missed a meeting. At the time of my fieldwork, José and Octavio were talking extensively about Los Indignados, the political movement in Spain, and the Arab Spring.

Andrés is an active participant in the movement called MORENA (Movimiento de Regeneración Nacional) led by Andrés Manuel López Obrador, a key presidential candidate in the 2012 elections; he also ran in the 2006 election. Although Obrador created the movement, it is widely understood to be a movement from “below.” In 2011, for Andres, Obrador represented the only candidate who could stop the full force of the neoliberal policies that have shaped Mexico since the 80’s, and even more since the signing of NAFTA in 1994. Andrés’ drive to seek change in Mexico often converges with the work he does for “the project” of creating a union committee. In his conversations with workers, Andres correlates the exploitation and inequalities at the factory with the economic situation in Mexico. “Change,” he often repeats, “is needed inside and outside the factory.” He describes himself as being de izquierda – “of the left.”

At the bi-monthly meetings, Mexican politics were also the subject of conversation and contention. In this context, the differences between Andrés’ politics and Octavio’s and José’s were brought to the forefront. When they talked about Zapatismo, workers articulated their own views on this movement: “Zapatismo can only offer things to peasants but not to obreros

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132 López Obrador lost the 2012 elections and, as six years earlier, there were claims about electoral forgery.
(proletarians).” For Andrés, the schism between Obrador and the Zapatistas is not about one movement addressing peasants and indigenous people while the other addresses the urban worker. The split between these two political movements was rather created prior the 2006 elections. “There were people supporting the Zapatista cause but when they attacked Obrador [prior the elections of 2006] we all felt attacked by [Subcomandante] Marcos (the most visible face of the EZLN); [the attack] divided the country and that was a disaster because then the PAN [Partido Acción Nacional—a party that oscillates between center-right to right] won the elections.”133 Their clashing politics and the tension that it created at times permeated the ambience of the meetings.

Ramírez’s inspirations and vision, on the other hand, are largely shaped by union politics and by his experience of working on the assembly line. He has been a unionized worker at Volkswagen de México for 40 years. But, unlike the other four men, he has been re-hired twice. After a few years of working at Volkswagen de México, he joined the dissident movement known as the “July 20th Movement” that in 1992 opposed the restructuring of labor, the introduction of “lean-production”, and NAFTA’s related transformations. He actively participated in the 1992 conflict. After this conflict, he was blacklisted. Eventually, he managed to return to Volkswagen, “thanks to someone in the union committee sympathetic towards [him] and [his] politics.” Ramírez is the quietest of the five workers. During the 2011 union election, Ramírez was accused by the union Poder Sindical of “creating trouble on the lines,” i.e., of convincing people

133 These attacks unfolded in the context of La Otra Campaña, a campaign parallel to the presidential campaign. Subcomandante Marcos traveled throughout Mexico to meet with many people including factory workers, indigenous people, feminists, women and LGBTQ right activists, peasants, teachers, prostitutes, intellectuals, fishermen, young people, and students “to listen [to] the people who struggle” (Marcos, S. 2006).
to vote for a particular group. He was made to sign a paper and was fired. For at least two months, Ramírez was without a job but nevertheless kept attending the meetings. Once the new union committee was elected in 2011, the other four workers talked to incoming General Secretary, Antonio Trejo, and succeeded in convincing him to re-install Ramírez in his job by January 2012.

Ramírez too seems to be inspired by anti-capitalist politics. On the notebook that he took to all the meetings there is a sticker from the CGT, an organization in Spain that describes itself as fighting against authoritarianism, capitalism, and an unjust society. This organization follows libertarian politics and anarcho-syndicalism. The sticker, visible to all at every meeting as he placed the notebook on the table, shows a garbage can and reads, _el capital lo tiene claro: los derechos humanos son basura (“Capital has it clear: human rights are garbage”)._

Marco is also inspired by union politics. His brother was a worker at Volkswagen de México even before he was but was fired and not re-hired because of his involvement in the 1992 conflict. But unlike Andres, José and Octavio, Marco doesn’t speak openly about his politics. Nevertheless, he is vocal about wanting to change the role of the union and the labor situation at the factory. But his vision of _el proyecto_ differs from the rest. In his view, the union should operate like a company. He often insists that the group should think like _empresarios_ (businessmen) and recommends videos of motivational talks “shown by Volkswagen de México.”

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134 See more on this particular union election below.
135 He is the only one whose son is enrolled at Volkswagen’s Escuela de Becarios which teaches technical training to young people who are later incorporated into the labor force.
136 The speakers in these talks are well-known in Mexico: Josefina Vazquez Mota, who in 2011 was the presidential candidate from the _PAN (Partido Acción Nacional)_ party, and Miguel Angel Cornejo, famous for his workshops on charismatic leadership. Titles of his workshops include “How to motivate oneself” or “Triumph: Is there any
The compañeros’ political inspirations and visions are a bricolage. They are united in their goal to overcome la clase fracturada but disagree on how best to address workers at Volkswagen de México. Marco promotes using the language of motivational videos. He often repeated a lesson he learned from these videos: “What is the difference between a leader and a businessperson? If a leader sees a problem, he tries to solve it himself; the businessman convinces people so that they solve the problem!” Marco occasionally suggested that all of them should take leadership courses, a suggestion met with silence by the others. Octavio, José, Ramírez, and Andres, despite their conflicting personal political inspirations and leanings, agree that the project should develop from “below.” But they also share the language of la lucha de clases (class struggle), los capitalistas (the capitalists), solidaridad con los trabajadores (solidarity with workers), and la clase trabajadora (the working class) – a language that illustrates that they see the labor conditions, conflicts, frictions, and antagonisms not as confined to Volkswagen de México but as part of a larger systemic socio-economic order.

5.5 Local and Transnational Connections

The five compañeros are embedded in local and transnational networks. These connections also infuse their politics, their calls for solidarity, and their goal of having a union that is connected to other unions and activist groups. Their connections also help them to produce knowledge. In Puebla, they are connected to Huberto Juárez Nuñez, an Economics professor at UAP, who writes extensively on Volkswagen de México in Spanish and English. In the past, he has advised alternative?” Cornejo also has a school in Mexico City that trains “global class leaders.” Marco also mentioned Pedro Ferris the Con, a famous radio and TV anchor.
union committees and is involved in advising workers at the *maquiladoras* that supply to *Volkswagen de México* in their efforts to unionize.\(^{137}\) When the five *compañeros* have questions, they often turn to him. They are also connected to a group of labor lawyers. Occasionally, the bi-monthly meetings were held in the waiting area of these lawyers’ offices, especially when a large number of workers and other groups attended.

In addition to their Mexico-based professional network, the five *compañeros* have connections with a group called *Internationales Solidaritätskomitee* (International Solidarity Committee) based in Germany and referred to as KIS, reflecting its German initials. This group has been in Mexico twice to gather information about the current situation at *Volkswagen de México*. KIS’s last visit was in October 2011. The group that came was composed of university professors, students, and activists. The information that KIS gathers is not shared with the unions in Germany but with groups such as the five *compañeros* that are trying to create global solidarity networks outside of the union structure. Brigitte, a German woman in her fifties and the main contact of the five *compañeros*, describes unions in Germany, in fluent Spanish, as “very nationalistic” and lacking “an internationalist vision.” Unions only focus on “defending jobs at their factory and don’t care about what happens in the other factories even of the same company. There is competition among unions of the same company to win the right to produce a particular car model.”

The information that KIS gathers is also disseminated on the web radio station Radio Flora, based in Hannover. While it is usually broadcasted in German, every Sunday Brigitte also

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137 Juárez Nuñez not only helped female workers from Flex-N-Gate, a *maquiladora* supplier of Volkswagen, to organize an independent union (theirs was affiliated to the CTM) but also to counter the hostile media coverage that these workers were subjected to (Puga Martínez 2012). This *maquiladora* also supplies to Ford, Nissan, Chrysler, and General Motors. Because of this involvement with workers, he has been the target of attacks (Puga Martínez 2012).
broadcasts in Spanish and the focus is on Latin America. On her show, she talks about a wide range of different struggles happening in the Americas.

KIS has offered an international stage and audience to the struggles of the five compañeros. In 2005, KIS helped Octavio to travel to Hamburg, Germany, to participate in a meeting of a group called “Volkswagen’s critical shareholders,” attended by people wanting to know “what is really happening at Volkswagen de México.” With the help of a translator, Octavio described the labor conditions at Volkswagen de México and its “abuses.” This was a significant opportunity because he was able to voice the workers’ grievances without the union acting as an intermediary. He also participated in Brigitte’s radio show. When recounting his time in Germany, Octavio proudly explains that together with KIS and all the workers he met, he participated in the International Workers’ Day on May 1. KIS continues helping the five compañeros to have an international audience and expand their solidarity network. In the summer of 2012, KIS helped Andres and José to travel to Munich, Germany, to attend the International Congress of Autoworkers.

Through KIS, the five compañeros have met other workers. They are in contact with workers from Continental Tire Ecuador, the IG Metall (the largest industrial union in Germany), and from what was known as Continental Tire Guadalajara, Mexico. Once in a while Octavio evokes the story of workers from Continental, Mexico. After three years on strike, the workers created a cooperative, the Corporación de Occidente, and bought the company from the multinational company Continental Tire Germany, the fourth largest tire producer in the world.

Besides the workers’ struggles elsewhere in Mexico and internationally, the five compañeros sometimes also look to Volkswagen’s past. Their political vision of the future of organized labor is infused by the histories of labor struggle at Volkswagen de México and the belief that class solidarity existed among Volkswagen workers in the past but today is broken.
Occasionally past struggles and strikes are evoked. Evocating them emphasizes that at different moments, there has been unity and solidarity among the workforce. Yet, my interlocutors’ political inspirations and visions for the futures of labor organizing are not contained by these histories. The political inspirations and leanings of the five compañeros are heteroglossic and not always in easy agreement. But in working towards overcoming la clase fracturada, their heterogeneous inspirations and visions coalesce and open up possibilities to re-imagine a form of collectivity bound by solidarity.

Their political inspirations, their connections to local and global networks, and a wide range of struggles within and outside of Mexico shape the politics of the five compañeros. Their inspirations and connections, furthermore, show the ways in which they actively work towards crafting solidarity beyond Volkswagen’s grounds. It is not only that they want to see industrial workers at the forefront of social struggles. They also understand solidarity to be local and transnational as well as crisscrossing the spectrum of social struggles and identifications.

5.6 A Prelude to the Futures of Labor Organizing

Today’s meeting is centered on the upcoming 2011 election of a new union committee. The consensus is that all the groups (planillas) competing are “dubious” (dudosas). The five compañeros are trying to figure out which of the competing groups can bring “real change” while also identifying which group can best pave the road for el proyecto. They are invested in finding a group that has visions and ideas similar to theirs. To gain a better sense of the ideas and visions of each group and of the people composing the groups, Octavio, Andres, José, Marco,  

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138 On the strikes that Volkswagen’s workers have organized against Volkswagen de México and on labor conflicts, see Fraile García 1999; Juárez Nuñez 1998; 2006; Healy (2008); Middlebrook (1989); Montiel (2007); Rieger (2013); Vanderbush (1998).
and Ramírez agree that if a group invites one of them to participate they would collectively consider the possibility.¹³⁹

Marco, for instance, has already been invited to participate and to run for the position of sports secretary (the person organizing the union’s sports events) in the internal election of a particular group. For that internal election, contenders had to come up with proposals. Marco’s main proposal was to ban alcoholic beverages at all sports events. In today’s meeting, Marco is recounting the outcome of the internal election: he lost. He believes the group didn’t like his proposal. Andres has received an invitation from another group. Octavio, however, is completely opposed to Andres accepting the invitation. He offers two reasons: they are “not trustworthy people,” and the person running to become the next SITIAVW General Secretary is known to be an usurero – a money lender who has made money from charging high interest rates to workers. Andres, on the other hand, replies “it is possible to change the proposals of this group once I become an insider.” Octavio disagrees: “You’re only one person. They are many, and power corrupts.”

The meetings before and after the election were the most intense discussions among the five compañeros that I witnessed. For about three months, they met almost every week to discuss proposals, exchange background information on the candidates, attend the weekend events of all the competing groups separately (to divide the work but also to prevent showing their connection to other workers), and then to call each other after each event to exchange opinions. They passionately negotiated among themselves to collectively choose a group and to rally other

¹³⁹ Each planilla (group) is composed of twelve to fifteen laborers that, while contending for the same group, are also contending for different positions (secretarios) at the union. These positions are General Secretary; Labor and Conflicts Secretary (6); Organization and Statistics Secretary (1); Minutes and Interior Secretary (1); Propaganda and Education Secretary (1); Treasurer (1); Sports Secretary (1); Foresight and Social Security Secretary (3). The numbers can vary: for example a contending planilla Alianza Obrera (Laborers’ Alliance) had twenty-three people and many of them were considered “Assistants” (auxiliares).
workers to vote for that group. Their political ideas, visions, and ideals shaped their interpretation of the electoral process and its outcome. Even though Octavio and José seemed disenchanted by union politics, neither of them believes in “white votes,” that is, invalidating their votes. So, they worked with the other men to find a group that all of them collectively could support.

The materials distributed during the campaign were carefully collected and stored as sources of information. The five compañeros amassed pens, lighters, calendars, flyers with information about the contenders, and the proposals distributed by each contending group—they even collected some for me. At the meetings, they meticulously examined each of the nine competing groups: dissecting proposals, analyzing them word by word, and asking whether the proposals made sense in the current socio-economic context in Mexico, were within the collective agreement, and were feasible. All the materials were put into folders, after recording the date on which each item was distributed, and were brought to every meeting prior to the elections. Just as the appearance and aesthetics of the union magazine indicate all sorts of things to the five workers, the materials collected during the electoral process as well as the events organized by each group, indicate more than just the surface presentation of a particular group.

For example, the competing group called “We are all Volkswagen” hired external people to run its campaign: a motivational coach and two publicists. At the first event to introduce this group to unionized Volkswagen workers, waiters served sodas and chips. The event culminated in a meal made of lamb (mixiotes), rice, beans, tortillas, and salsas for more than one hundred people. The event took place at a rental hall located in the Volkswagen’s workers’ apartment...
units Unidad Habitacional Obreros Independientes de Volkswagen. Only José and I attended this event.

At the next meeting, José reported his impressions of the event – all recorded in his notebook. The group “We are all Volkswagen” is “de naturaleza contraria (contrary to nature): it should be called “we are all SITIAVW.’” Reading from his notebook, José described the event: “The motivational coach gave a speech titled ‘Dialogues Instead of Conflicts’ and suggested that ‘la cultura del conflicto ya se acabo’ (the culture of conflict is over); that what we need now is the professionalization of the union to gain consciousness and to learn the rules of the game” and “that the relationship between factory and worker is a win-win situation.” José mentioned the food, the waiters, and that after two hours of speeches and presentations, there was no time for workers to ask questions – only a questionnaire with six questions was distributed. For José, it was clear that this group “has money from outside,” a suggestion that leaves the door open to the suspicion that money is coming from the factory. “Their proposals are not radical, and they don’t really care about listening to la base.”

Since I had also attended the event, Marco asked me what I thought of it. Also drawing from my notebook, I told them that I had found it striking that one of the publicists basically ran the whole event and that all of the workers were dressed identically: jeans and a white shirt, the colors of Volkswagen. To me, the event looked rehearsed and staged. I found the introduction of the worker contending for General Secretary a bit over the top – he was described as “a great inspiration, a true leader for the workers.” To be noted no women in the group of candidates. There were, however, a few women holding banners that read “Thank you for taking women into

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140 In these units several workers live with their families. This is not company housing. They were built in the 70s by the union during the years of Diego Ortiz Balderas.
account” and “We know that culture is important… we support you.” My guess, I told them, is that these women don’t work for the factory but are the wives or daughters of the workers running for office.

Most importantly though I noticed how the speech of the worker running for General Secretary only revolved around family and leadership. It sounded memorized and rehearsed. Only for a few minutes did he divert from his memorized speech and talk about his own experiences working on the lines: work overloads and the exhaustion caused by repetitive tasks, “We are not robots that can be connected to electricity.” At this moment, his presence came to life.¹⁴¹

Even though Marco urges the group to take leadership classes, he also voted to remove this group from consideration by the five compañeros. His argument was that hiring coaches and motivational speakers to talk to workers didn’t make sense since these “people would never know the reality of the assembly lines.”

A few weeks into the electoral process, the five compañeros collectively decided to throw their support to Sindicalismo Obrero. This group was considered to be the closest to the ideas, ideals, and vision of their own project. There was a rumor that this group was coached by Diego Ortiz, the founder of SITIAW and affectionately remembered by many workers today. It also seemed that Joel Martínez, a worker who was part of a union committee in the 80’s, was behind this group. If this was true, the five compañeros concluded, Sindicalismo Obrero might enable the union to regain its strength and to no longer be a puppet of the factory.

¹⁴¹ My presence at these events was noticed by other workers. After accompanying Ramírez to an event where another contending group was introduced, he told me that later a couple of workers called him and asked why he had brought a journalist to the event. He didn’t correct their assumption. He told them that I was working for Radio Flora, the Germany web based radio station.
They also picked this group based on their events. Instead of a meal served by waiters, simple sandwiches were distributed by workers supporting the group. Their flyers were also revealing. Unlike the other groups, the flyers of Sindicalismo Obrero were not made of glossy paper. For Octavio, “it was clear” that they didn’t hire anyone external to write the content of the flyers as “punctuation signs [were] missing.” Sandwiches and missing punctuation signs indexed the limited resources of this group. All this meant that “Sindicalismo Obrero has not received money from the factory and that their ideas are more important to them than their appearance.”

When the time to materialize el proyecto comes, the five compañeros want to follow the same strategy: no glossy paper, no excess, ideas instead of appearances.

Figure 11. Logo of Sindicalismo Obrero, also known as AMARILLA (yellow). The scale is balanced by Capital and Trabajo (labor, work, job). On top, it reads luchar y pensar (to struggle and think), and the logo is framed by the words unity, independence, autonomy, democracy, responsibility, participation, and solidarity.

5.7 The Limits of Marxist Language

Sindicalismo Obrero didn’t win the elections. It came in second. In trying to understand why the group had not won, despite their “sound” proposals, and to “detect” what had convinced workers to vote for a different group, the five compañeros went over the entire election process. Once again, they brought their folders with all the materials collected, reviewed their notes, and created a table with the number of votes and what percentage these represented.
After comparing the flyers of the winner and the events it had organized with those of their chosen group, they agreed that the problem was related to the very reasons for which they had chosen *Sindicalismo Obrero*. In a meeting that lasted over two hours, the five compañeros concluded that their contender had used words such as “*capitalismo*” and “*lucha de clases*” too many times. *Sindicalismo Obrero* had also proposed to create *grupos de estudios* (study groups) to discuss the *estatutos* (the union’s regulations) – an idea that had also been put forth by José for their own project. After the results, my interlocutors now met this proposal with sarcasm: “Workers cannot understand the *estatutos* if the only thing they read is *Poder Sindical*."

In retrospect, José thought that the language used by *Sindicalismo Obrero* “was too sophisticated for many of the ignorant compañeros.” I heard José make a similar point about workers when he explained his critique of *Poder Sindical* and the union. Even though José wanted the magazine and the union to be more “Marxist” – in terms of language, politics, and practice – all the time and not just during elections, he also interjected that it was pointless since many of the compañeros no entienden (“don’t understand [that language]”). Marco also expressed that the language was too sophisticated by saying that their contending group “*usa*
palabras domingueras” - a colloquial way of saying that their language is complicated and full of jargon.

For Octavio, too, the significant difference between Sindicismo Obrero and the group that won the elections came down to language. The flyers of the group that won, Nueva Era Sindical (New Union Epoch), describe everyday situations at the factory such as work accidents, social and job security, as well as stocking up the union’s store, instead of abstract things such as capitalismo and capital. This group’s logo was also more eye-catching and representative of the social life connected to the factory and car production than a hand trying to keep the balance between capital and labor. The logo is another representation of “The Volkswagen Family.” In the post-election comparison, the logo of Sindicismo Obrero was now described as “too ideological.”

Figure 13. Logo of Nueva Era Sindical, also known as ORO (gold). The VW logo on the overalls is not visible. All is enclosed by a screw and the words “Our Strength is You” and “Trust.”

The five compañeros didn’t vote for Nueva Era Sindical because the people that belong to this group, they explained, “are already domesticated by [the office] of labor relations.” The group didn’t represent “real change” that “makes the company shiver.” They considered Sindicismo
*Obrero* to be “radical.” In the post-election assessment, Marco declared “the contemporary compañero doesn’t like radicalismo, not even contentious language.” Their assessment suggests not only that status and positionality within the factory structure have created “the fractured class,” but that fragmentation is also related to generations and cultural capital. “The contemporary compañero” has not lived a history of labor struggles at *Volkswagen de México* and they “don’t understand [that] language.” In light of the election outcome, the five compañeros concluded that “the language of *lucha de clases* is choteado” – a colloquial way of saying that the language of class struggle is worn out or overused.

This assessment, however, doesn’t mean that there is no class struggle. Rather, an alternative grammar and genre is required to address “the fractured class” while still conveying their Marxist politics. Alternative modes of recognition among the workforce that go beyond class and status identity are simultaneously a way to emphasize the systemic conditions that have created fragmentation. Ultimately, modes of recognition are the means to cultivate *conciencia de clase* (class consciousness) – the condition of possibility to craft solidarity beyond union politics.

### 5.8 A Poetic Solidarity

We are at a coffee shop. For today’s meeting, only Octavio, Andres, José, and I are present, as well as Fernando and Mario – two Volkswagen workers who irregularly attend the meetings. The time to negotiate the annual wage raise is approaching, and so Fernando asks what it means to be part of the committee (*la comision revisora*) that is formed every year to negotiate with *Volkswagen de México*. The committee is composed of the union’s general secretary, the union committee, and a total of forty-four workers chosen as representatives of the unionized workers and with whom the union committee consults.
Except for Octavio, none of the compañeros have ever been part of this committee, and thus the question is implicitly directed at him. The story he tells in response is not new for me nor for Andres and José. He has told the story a number of times to me and to different workers. In his account, “all the negotiations are pesadas (heavy) and it is a very tiring job (muy cansado) because the Ministry of Labor and Volkswagen de México tire you out.” Octavio’s account centers mostly on how workers are treated. He describes that while Volkswagen’s executives, the government representatives, and the union’s secretary general are in a room with a ventilation system, the room where workers are is hot. “They leave us there for hours.” Negotiations take place in Mexico City, at the Ministry of Labor, and they can last weeks. “Volkswagen’s executives stay in hotels while we have to travel back and forth every day [about a two-hour drive or bus ride]; exhaustion begins to accumulate.” Eventually the workers representing the unionized workforce “accept any offer not because we all agree but because we are all tired and bored.”

The process is also marked by the tensions that arise between the compañeros: “[we] lose our valentía (courage), the spirit that drives us (el espíritu que nos mueve), the belief that something is going to change.” When that happens, “workers also begin insulting each other.” In addition to the frictions and exhaustion, fear also permeates the ambience of the negotiations: “los de la planta (Volkswagen’s committee) recognize you and they say otra vez tu (you once again), and thus it is not as anonymous as we would like it to be. It is as if they were infusing fear once they recognize you. You become visible.”

Every time Octavio narrated this story, it was as if he was re-living the disappointments of the negotiations, their outcome, and his sense of helplessness. Listening to him, in particular when he talks about the relationship between “fear” and “visibility,” is a reminder of how this relationship continues to be a medium through which a form of violence is executed. When fear
is articulated it brings to the forefront the regimes of affect shaping not only car production on
the lines but also the relationships between workers and executives: a power relation of
domination.

The story, however, does not have the same effect on all listeners. Abruptly, Andres
interrupts Octavio. Irritated, he asks, “Are we going to keep talking about this? I have heard this
story millions of times. It’s time to talk about what we want, our project, the factory. Or are we
having a meeting to always talk about the same?” Andrés and Octavio often clashed with each
other. The conflict, however, goes beyond different political leanings (Andres dismissing
Zapatismo, or Octavio dismissing López Obrador). Separately, they accused each other of
“protagonismo” – of stealing the limelight. Both of them accused each other of always wanting to
assert their point and their own way of doing things, of wanting to “have the last word” and to
dominate the meetings. But it is also fueled by a generational conflict: Octavio is about ten years
younger than Andres. In a patriarchal society, there is the implicit understanding that the eldest
male is the authority. However, even though José and Ramírez are the oldest and have worked
the longest at Volkswagen de México, this struggle for domination is only between Andres and
Octavio.

Andres’s abrupt interruption is followed by silence. By now, we are all looking at our
notebooks. All of a sudden, breaking the awkward silence, José looks up from his notebook and
asks, “a word that rhymes with inquebrantable (unbreakable)?” As if leaving their quarrel
behind, both men begin throwing around words – velocidades (speediness), explotadores
(exploiters), neoliberales (neoliberal) - until Octavio asks, “what is the poem about”? José
responds that it is about the union’s electoral process. It is titled *Cambio de a de veras* which roughly translates into Real Change. José begins reading from his notebook:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spanish</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>En esta Puebla del Vocho</em></td>
<td><em>In this Puebla of the Beetle</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>De tiempos neoliberales</em></td>
<td><em>Of neoliberal times</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>De outsourcing y desigualdades</em></td>
<td><em>Of outsourcing and inequalities</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Y con un sindicato mocho</em></td>
<td><em>And with a conservative union</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>En tiempos electorales</em></td>
<td><em>In electoral times</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Surgen falsos redentores</em></td>
<td><em>Appear false redeemers</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“<em>Valientes trabajadores</em>”</td>
<td>“<em>Brave laborers</em>”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>De inquietudes temporales</em></td>
<td><em>With temporal concerns</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Hasta invierten dinero</em></td>
<td><em>They even invest money</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Cuando el proyecto es ambiguo</em></td>
<td><em>When the project is ambiguous</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Sin conciencia de enemigo</em></td>
<td><em>Without being conscious of the enemy</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Sin dignidad de obrero</em></td>
<td><em>Without the dignity of a worker</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Fracturados, confundidos...</em></td>
<td><em>Fractured [fragmented], confused...</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Vamos desesperanzados</em></td>
<td><em>We go in despair</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>A votar por el menos malo</em></td>
<td><em>To vote for the least bad</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Detestando a los vendidos</em></td>
<td><em>Hating those who sell-out</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Al pasar las elections</em></td>
<td><em>Once elections have passed</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Admiran las conciencias*</td>
<td><em>They put to sleep the consciousness</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Abundan las indiferencias</em></td>
<td><em>Indifferences are plentiful</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Reinando las opresiones</em></td>
<td><em>Oppressions are ruling</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¿<em>Como cambiar de a de veras?</em></td>
<td><em>How to change for real?</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¿<em>Matando al oportunismo?</em></td>
<td><em>Killing the opportunism?</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Por supuesto que uno mismo</em></td>
<td><em>Of course one oneself</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Tiene respuestas certeras</em></td>
<td><em>Has accurate answers</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Intercambiando saberes</em></td>
<td><em>Exchanging knowledge</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Interactuando constante</em></td>
<td><em>Interacting constantly</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Nos despertamos conscientes</em></td>
<td><em>We wake up aware</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Le entramos a los quehaceres</em></td>
<td><em>We work together</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Quehaceres muy solidarios</em></td>
<td><em>Working in solidarity</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>De hermandad inquebrantable</em></td>
<td><em>Of an unbreakable brotherhood</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

142 *De a de veras* is a colloquial way of saying “for real.”

143 *Mocho* is a colloquial and means ‘conservative.’ It is also used to describe a person who regularly goes to church.
José writes poems describing the social relations among workers, mechanisms used by Volkswagen de México to discipline workers, the union, and the social life in the factory and its every day. The poem above describes the election as a grim process unfolding in oppressive times where workers have to go for the “least bad.” It is about the atmosphere, the ambience permeating that process. The poem, however, ends on a more optimistic note. The last two and a half verses point to the idea and the ideal that the five compañeros embody and perform at every meeting: Only by working together and exchanging knowledge can we awaken our consciousness and create solidarity and an unbreakable collectivity to create change. Although I don’t know if José’s request for a word rhyming with “unbreakable” during a moment of tension between Andrés and Octavio was merely coincidence or intentional, speaking the word out loud seemed to remind the five compañeros that unity begins between them.¹⁴⁴

A wide range of experiences, events, and social interactions are the inspiration for José’s poems. He draws from the dynamics of the meetings and the relationship among the five compañeros. José writes his poems wherever inspiration comes. Sometimes he arrives with a poem that he wrote at home or during lunch time at the factory; other times, he writes them during the meetings, jotting down words in his notebook. When I started attending the meetings, I thought he was taking notes but over time I realized, because he interrupts the conversation by asking for words to find a rhyme, that he was in fact writing or sketching poems. Although the other four compañeros consider José to be the author, they participate in the writing process by suggesting words to him and collectively brainstorming.

¹⁴⁴ How the five compañeros negotiate their differences and their relationships amongst themselves offers a glimpse into men-to-men relationships at the workplace and within the context of NAFTA and neoliberal transformations in Mexico (see Gutmann 2010).
José’s poems are written in his notebook and then typed into a word processor. After printing a few of the poems, the five compañeros then Xerox them to make several copies. Poems are more than a hobby or cathartic medium through which José articulates his experiences on the assembly line or his thoughts and feelings about the situation of workers, working on the line, or about Volkswagen de México or the union. Rather, the purpose of these poems is that they be distributed among the workers. Poems are a medium to convey the labor situation at Volkswagen de México and how, regardless of categories and wage ranks, all workers experience the grim situation that José describes. Similar to the Zapatistas (the EZLN, José and his compañeros are “[deploying] poetry as a means of political struggle” (Graeber 2005). The five compañeros believe that by now most of Volkswagen’s workers have read the poems.

Copies of poems are scattered in places where they think there are no surveillance cameras, such as bathrooms, showers, and change rooms. The task, however, is difficult; they try to do it when no other workers are around. Even more difficult is to scatter the poems in the women’s areas since no female workers are part of their group. It would be dangerous if the authorship of the poems became known. To protect José and themselves, the poems are signed by Banda Vocho (the Vocho Gang). Some workers suspect that José writes the poems and have even asked him while holding a Xeroxed copy of a poem in hand. He always responds, “it wasn’t me.”

A poem that José wrote in 2009 continues to be Xeroxed and scattered around the factory. It is entitled ¡Que Jornada! (That Working Day!). The poem is a powerful reminder that the bodily experiences and states of being a wage worker on the assembly lines are shared by all regardless of category, status or wage level.

¡Que Jornada!  
That Working Day!

Esta jornada laboral  
This working day
Con ritmos acelerados
With accelerated rhythms
Nos tiene sobreexplotados
Has us over-exploited
Y con miseria salarial
And with a miserable wage

Aumentan velocidades
Speeds are increased
De forma indiscriminada
In an indiscriminate way
¿Y la condición humana?
And the human condition?
¿Y pinches utilidades?
And the measly profit sharing?

Condiciones insalubres
Unhealthy conditions
Sujetos a la cadena
Subject to the chain
Situación que nos enferma
A condition that makes us sick
Polvos, solvents... ¡Mil Mugres!
Powders, solvents... Dirty by the thousand

Orinamos con premura
We urinate with urgency
Así también defecamos
In the same way we defecate
Y mucho nos aguantamos
And we hold it for a long time
La Jornada es de locura
The workday is madness

De las descompensaciones
About the unbalances
Cuando los turnos rotamos
When we rotate shifts
¿Como nos recuperamos?
How do we recover?
¿Acaso habrá soluciones?
Would there be any solutions?

Es más de lo necesario
It is more than necessary
Todo lo que trabajamos
All what we work
Y que poquito cobramos
And what little we earn
Es tan miserable el salario
This wretched wage

Así creamos la riqueza
That is how we create the wealth
Que se apropien unos cuantos
That is appropriated by few
Nosotros que somos tantos
We are many
Dispersamos nuestra fuerza
Scattering our strength

“¡Qué Jornada!” conveys experiences of how mass production unfolds on the assembly lines, of
what it means experientially to manufacture cars. In José’s poem, the worker’s body and bodily
experiences and states are mediums to convey the conditions of labor. These conditions have
been exacerbated by the “lean production” model in conjunction with the labor conditions set by
NAFTA, as well as the transformation of Mexico into a key global car producer. This
conjunction materializes in the body and everyday life on the lines: accelerating the line to
produce more cars, exhaustion, oppression, breathing chemicals and pollutants, hours of work in exchange for low-wages, body unbalances as a consequence of manufacturing for twenty-four hours, broken and damaged bodies, and disregard for physiological and bodily discomfort. Assembling a car affects the mood, mind, and body of each worker regardless of categories, hierarchies, and wage levels. Similar to Marx’s piece in *Capital I*, “The Working Day” (1990b), “¡Que Jornada!” conveys what it means to appropriate the body and labor and to transform them into an instrument to produce absolute surplus value.

The poems are subversive. They aim to create a sense of recognition among the labor force beyond status, positionality, generation, and cultural capital. Poems emphasize and are reminders that workers share the bodily experiences of exhaustion, damaged bodies, and decay. This bodily experience is obscured by competition among workers, fear, the uncertain situation of *eventuales* and subcontracted workers, wage gaps, and hierarchical systems. The poems show that these structural conditions are the grounds to re-imagine social relationships among workers. It is a collectivity beyond personal interests and structural conditions.

The poetic genre is a mode of doing and conveying politics. It aims at cultivating *conciencia*. Although the five compañeros argue that “Marxist language *esta choteado*” (“is overused”), through his poems José is conveying a Marxist understanding of the world: working more than what is necessary (surplus labor), workers producing wealth (surplus value), and capitalism as a social relation. At the same time, the poems offer a different grammar from the Marxist’s register. Instead of conveying Marxist politics in the abstract, the poems evoke the bodily states experienced by being an instrument of capital. However, unlike the Marxist tradition of “awakening,” *conciencia* is here cultivated by the sense of recognition created by the bodily states and sensations experienced while assembling cars. It is a visceral way of moving and engaging the labor force. *Conciencia* is a subtle political move to craft a sense of solidarity.
5.9 Conclusion

The practices of the five compañeros are a lens into the current conditions under which workers are organizing –fear, surveillance, a fragmented labor force and depoliticized union. They show how a working-class identity and consciousness is an ongoing process of making. But what it is significant about their attempts is how they draw on the bodily states that workers experience on the lines and transform them into a political instrument. Bodily states conveyed through the poetic genre viscerally engage and move workers, regardless of their categories and wage ranks. While the attempt to restore la clase fracturada (the fractured class) implies the existence of “a sort of collective ['oneness'] with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning” (Hall 1990:23), their practice of cultivating conciencia, creating modes of recognition and crafting solidarity, also suggests that class identity is a form of “production which is never completed, always in process (ibid: 222).” In this production, the poems bring to the forefront the bodily states of being an instrument of capital and how it shapes the social relationships among workers.

The knowledge produced at the meetings and conveyed in the poems counters desinformación. This knowledge is constituted by workers’ grievances as well as by the visceral landscape that shapes car manufacturing. More significantly, its production is a collective endeavor, beginning with the thirty plus quasi-fieldworkers gathering information in the factory to how the five compañeros exchange, discuss, and create the poems. Through this collective endeavor and by giving class struggle an alternative grammar, the five compañeros imagine the futures of labor organizing.
I end this dissertation with the political work of the five compañeros to underline the unexpected consequences of commodity production in Mexico. Although labor conditions continue to worsen on the assembly lines, fragmenting the social relationships among the labor force and workers’ bodies, simultaneously, new ways of being political have emerged. The same labor conditions enabling Mexico’s global car economy have also created modes of recognition that expand the meanings and ways of carrying out labor organizing.
6 Unscripted Futures

Looking at the model car, I notice that its original white color has turned to a light yellowish tone. Fine lines of a distinct blue curve along the car’s contours. They end in a circle filled with the letters V and W, the logo of Volkswagen. The car’s name is Wind. Carlos chose the name as, in both English and German, it evokes the presence of wind energy. Wind represents how Carlos, a twenty-year old Mexican student of Engineering in Automotive Design, imagines cars will be powered in the future. Sitting in the Starbucks on Juárez Avenue in Puebla, Carlos explains that he made Wind by using the bottom an old toy car and sculpting a new body with one kilo of Plastipox bars. To make the bars more malleable, he mixed in one liter of hand-cream. Now, almost a year since the making of Wind, Carlos’ fingerprints on the car’s body are a reminder that he molded Wind with his own hands. The combination of Plastipox and hand-cream gives Wind its striking physical qualities: Once the bars had dried, its weight doubled which then caused one of the wheels to bend, and the hand cream has made the car shine and gives it its yellowish tone.

While the car is called Wind, the concept that Carlos presented to high-ranking Mexican and German executives from Volkswagen de México is called ‘Development of an Innovative Concept for a Family Car’ (Desarrollo de un Concepto Innovador para un Auto Familiar). Walking me through the Power-Point slides that he presented to the executives, Carlos explains that Wind is specifically designed for the market that Volkswagen has labeled ‘the Mexican market’ – a market characterized as having large families and streets with holes. To
accommodate large families, Wind’s oval shaped is enhanced. Its gull-wing doors and its hatchback give the impression of a big space.

While Wind is made for Mexico’s long-travelled and aging roads, it also anticipates the future. It is powered by the perpetual rotation of its wheels, transforming the movement of the wind into kinetic energy, which in turn is transformed into mechanical and electric energy. Furthermore, it has sensors to indicate to the driver if a person or garbage can is behind the car when the car is in reverse or parking. Other sensors automatically disable the horn when the car enters a hospital zone, and when entering a school zone the speed is automatically lowered and the driver cannot increase the speed. Given that Mexico is not fully mapped by a global positioning system (GPS), these sensors currently would not function in the present day. But Wind is an invitation to imagine a future of alternative and renewable forms of energy. Simultaneously, as a commodity and technological artifact, Wind reminds us of how cars continue to be imagined and represented as the hegemonic mode of transportation and as a main propeller of economic development.

Carlos belongs to the first generation of engineers sponsored by Volkswagen de México. In 2011, along with two other students, he won a scholarship granted by the factory. The scholarship covered four years of his studies at Universidad Popular Autónoma del Estado de Puebla (UPAEP), a private university. Although different sub-fields, such as chemical and industrial engineering, have been taught in Mexico for more than fifty years, the engineering majors connected to the auto industry only focused on manufacturing processes and not on
Therefore, to complement the training he could receive in Mexico, the scholarship also covered Carlos’ studies in Germany during his final year.

In this Epilogue, I revisit the ways in which Volkswagen’s car economy continues to be constituted and re-inscribed –materially, and through the imaginaries and rationales that shape it –while shifting attention from the past and present to how its futures are in the making. By doing this, I highlight convergent projects and the possibilities they open up, while still being intertwined with the ways Mexico’s bond to transnational corporations is reinforced. Futures are not predictable; they are contingent. Writing this only a few weeks into Trump’s presidency in the United States, many people worry about a potential collapse of the auto-industry in Mexico. The current moment reminds us of the power relations shaping Mexico’s car economy as well as of how precarious and contingent that industry’s presence has been all along. Yet, within this field of power and economic relations, futures are also imagined and made by people like Carlos. These futures are enabled but not contained by Volkswagen de México and the vision of Mexico as a global car producer.

In order to delve into how futures are in the making, I turn to an institutional arrangement called vinculación. In doing so, I elucidate how Volkswagen’s car economy is renewed and appropriated. Vinculación paves the conditions of possibility leading to the emergence of a new generation of high-tech workers. According to Mexico’s Agency of Higher Education, this

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145 Other examples are civil engineering and electrical engineering. All the strands in one way or another are part of the narrative and making of modern Mexico and have contributed to, or constructed, modernity and the modern. An example is the construction of infrastructures by civil engineers or chemical and industrial engineers working for PEMEX, Mexico’s oil company.

146 It is important to note that while there is a real worry about transnational corporations leaving Mexico, Trump’s threat has also brought about a familiar patriotic response in Mexico which, while highlighting a historically contentious relation between Mexico and the U.S., diverts the attention from the fragility of Mexico’s economic model that relies on transnational corporations, trade agreements and on the remittances sent by migrants. This patriotic response omits a discussion of what alternatives might be possible.
arrangement aims to connect government, universities, and society to corporations considered the “productive sector.” Although vinculación resembles the ‘triple-helix’ program in the United States, which transfers technology from universities to industries, in Mexico’s case, the direction is reversed: Corporations transfer technology to universities, and as such, vinculación here refers to the making of a technologically-specialized and qualified labor force.

*Vinculación* entangles the German car company, the Mexican government, a private university, and students such as Carlos. It has become a key site for the production of Mexico’s global car economy. *Vinculación* is how the car economy – its materiality, the imaginaries surrounding it, and its affects– is reproduced. Crafting elite workers to design and produce cars shows how the future in the era of finance capitalism is still imagined as centrally rooted in commodity production. In this future, ‘knowledge’ and ‘technology’ –central to a post-productive imaginary– are the means of production.

*Vinculación* is central in the politics of national development and modernization (Hayden 2008:304). Anthropologist Cory Hayden, in her review of the field of Science and Technology Studies in Latin America, identifies it “as an idiom of relationality and entanglement” (2008:309) and translates it as “to connect or link” (ibid: 310). Although she identifies vinculación as an entanglement, she examines “entanglements” from a different vantage point than I have done in this dissertation. Hayden cites Laura Cházarro of the Centro de Investigación y de Estudios Avanzados del Instituto Politécnico Nacional:

> For scholars working in the field of the social studies of science and technology, *vinculación* –what it looks like, how to promote it, and why it has worked in some instances and failed in others- has become one of the keys to understanding the cultural and social dimensions of science and technology, and their relation to projects of
modernization, national development, and the intensified globalization of the markets in which Latin American nations (must) compete (Cházaro cited in Hayden 2008:310-11).

My approach is different and situates the entanglement of vinculación within the context of global capitalism. Hence, I do not translate vinculación as link or connection, as Hayden does (Acuña 1993; Bei 1997), nor as alliance or collaboration, as Volkswagen de México and UPAEP do. These translations assume equal power relations and reproduce the script of a mutually beneficial and utilitarian exchange, a ‘win-win’ relation. Such translations erase the rationale behind the crafting of high-tech workers and the histories and processes shaped by it. As the engineer in charge of Engineering in Automotive Design at UPAEP explained to me, the crafting of a workforce that embodies the know-how of car design follows the rationale to “lower the costs” (abaratar los costos) involved in car design.

This rationale is the same as in the mid-1960s, when Mexico became part of global production chains and the paradigmatic structure of global flexible accumulation and production emerged along the Mexican-US border: the maquiladora (Iglesias Prieto 1985). Maquiladoras emerged in tandem with a broader shift towards export-oriented industrialization, a trend that has been cemented through trade agreements since the signing of NAFTA in 1994. To make the country ‘attractive’ and ‘competitive’ for investments, wages and salaries have artificially been kept low. To ‘lower costs of production’ is also one of the rationales shaping outsourcing and deindustrialization in places such as the United States.

Vinculación then entangles possibilities and opportunities at different scales with forms of dependency, exploitation, and inequality. To illuminate these entanglements, I leave the word untranslated in this Epilogue to expose its roots in the Latin word vinculum - bond, shackle, or fetter- as well as its semantic richness. According to a Spanish dictionary, vinculación can refer
to “that which subjects one to an obligation” (vinculante); “to tie or fuse one thing to something else (vincular)”; it can also mean “to subject the luck or comportment of someone or something to some other person or thing,” “union or binding.” Leaving vinculación untranslated allows me elucidate the wide range of meanings, practices, and possibilities of this agreement at the local and global scale and their double-edged nature. Like many of the entanglements that I have traced in the preceding chapters, while vinculación opens up global possibilities, it also re-inscribes the inequalities, exploitation, subjugation, and dependency that have historically characterized (and enabled) the political economy of car manufacturing at the local and global scale.

6.1 Possibilities and Opportunities

Vinculación signals the convergence of futures on multiple scales. It seeks to pave the road for locating Mexico differently in the geography and hierarchy of global car production by rendering Mexico into a knowledge producer. Connecting universities with companies aims to overcome the global hierarchy that divides countries into “knowledge producers” – the so-called First World or “developed world” - and “cheap laborers” - the so-called Third World where commodities such as cars or computers are assembled. It is Mexico’s long history as a space of manufacturing and productive capital that enables this relationship in the first place and yet inspires a vision for its transcendence through vinculación.

147 Historically, the Latin root could also refer to “the ring inserted in the snout of pigs to keep them from nosing around too much” (vinco); Roman Law vincula; vincula publica (public prison); vinculum signoris (the tie that binds a creditor through the making of a pledge); or vinculum iuris (legal tie) (Diccionario de la lengua española de la real academia).
In this vision, cars will not only be assembled and manufactured in Mexico but will also be designed there. This transformation represents a shift from the sole extraction of physical labor to the construction of a high-tech workforce equipped to design a technological artifact. This shift only includes a limited number of people; workers on the assembly lines will still carry out production processes.

Currently in Mexico, there is an emphasis on technology-based skills and technical education. In the state of Guanajuato – four hours north of the city of Puebla - the government prepares aspiring people to pass the standardized test required to become part of the workforce in multinational companies and even pays a small bonus to companies such as Nivea or Pirelli that send workers abroad for training (Cave 2013). Crafting high-tech workers has long been Mexico’s preferred path to creating a middle-class society, stopping migration to the United States, and becoming part of the “developed nations.”

Along these lines, vinculación seeks to enhance the place of Mexico in the global landscape of car manufacturing. It is part of a larger project that aims at turning Mexico into an “automotive powerhouse.” It is also part of the Volkswagen Consortium’s strategy of becoming the largest car seller in the world. To achieve this, Volkswagen is not only invested in crafting a high-tech workforce but also in expanding car production in Mexico. In January 2013, Volkswagen de México opened its one-hundredth factory, in Silao, Guanajuato, to assemble engines. In 2016, Audi Mexico, also part of the Volkswagen Consortium, began manufacturing in San José Chiapa, Puebla. It is its first factory in Latin America.

Vinculación also places Puebla differently within the context of other cities in Mexico where cars are manufactured. It is now celebrated as a knowledge-producer. CNN Expansion, a

148 http://www.presidencia.gob.mx/mexico-potencia-automotriz/
business online news-site, noted one day after Volkswagen de México and UPAEP signed their vinculación agreement in June 2009,

Cars are the non plus ultra of design and engineering. Many have dreamed of drawing bodyworks and driving prototypes, but that privilege has been just for a few lucky ones (suertudos) from Detroit, Germany, Italy, or Japan. Now, in Puebla, that door has been opened by the hand of Volkswagen (CNN Expansion.com, 22 June 2009, my translation).

Volkswagen de México already had agreements with even more prestigious universities, such as Universidad de las Américas, Puebla (UDLAP) to develop a car-mobile phone to serve Volkswagen’s customers. But after UPAEP won the competition organized by Volkswagen de México to create a university major in Engineering in Automotive Design,¹⁴⁹ the factory sponsors UPAEP students alone. It is involved in the curriculum design and donates money and equipment to the university, such as robots and smaller versions of the welding stations used in its own factories. Using these donations, UPAEP has opened the Centro de Robótica en Soldadura (Center of Robotics in Welding). To train students, Volkswagen de México has also opened its extremely secretive car manufacturing departments. Whereas historically the use of

¹⁴⁹ The idea of creating a major in Engineering in Automotive Design came directly from Volkswagen de México. In 2009, Volkswagen in Mexico opened a competition among six universities to design the curriculum for this major: Universidad Popular de Estado de Puebla (UPAEP), Universidad de las Americas, Puebla (UDLAP), Universidad Iberoamericana Puebla (UI), Tecnologico de Monterrey, Puebla (ITESM), Universidad Autonoma de Puebla (UAP), and Instituto Politecnico Nacional, Mexico City, (IPN). Except for the last two, all are private and among the most expensive universities in Mexico. UPAEP won the competition. The curriculum was prepared by engineers at this university and closely resembles curricula in Germany. Other factors that played a role in granting Volkswagen’s sponsorship to UPAEP were university installations and the “quality” of the students. The engineer in charge of this major at UPAEP also argues that UPAEP was the only university that, prior to submitting the curriculum to the competition, had it approved by the Ministry of Education. This demonstrated to Volkswagen de México that “UPAEP has iniciativa (initiative).”
technology in manufacturing *de-skilled* workers (Braverman 1998), today it *re-skills* a segment of the workforce by crafting elite workers such as Carlos.

Since 2009, Engineering in Automotive Design has become a booming new discipline in Mexico, taught at four of the largest and well-established universities in Mexico as well as at private, smaller technical schools that have sprung up in the last twenty years. At UPAEP, the number of students has increased: in 2009, the first year that Engineering in Automotive Design was offered, forty students registered, in 2010, eighty-two, and by 2011, one hundred and twenty-two, seven of them women. Students come from all over Mexico.

When Carlos received his scholarship, and in his role as the student representative, he described the *vinculación* agreement between Volkswagen and UPAEP as “making it possible for students to acquire the capacities to be able to compete globally.” Having completed his studies in Germany, he now embodies a form of cultural capital and know-how that are not only specific to *Volkswagen de México* but can be applied in any other car company or other high-tech industry. He also has the possibility to join *Volkswagen de México* as an expert engineer – a highly desirable and prestigious job in Puebla.

As part of *Volkswagen de México*, Carlos has the opportunity to travel to Germany. Many other Mexican men, some single and others with their families, have migrated to Germany to work for the Volkswagen Consortium, either in Wolfsburg or Ingolstadt, where Audi’s factory is also located. Mexican women have also migrated to Germany as the wives of Germans who come to Puebla to work for multi-year stints. Unofficial statistics estimate that 250 Mexican families from Puebla live in Germany, and there are many interracial marriages.

*Volkswagen de México* then offers a migratory trajectory different from that of the mostly Mexican men who cross the border to the United States or work in Canada as temporary agricultural workers. Migration to the United States has characterized Mexico for more than a
century in terms of destination but also in terms of type of work, immigration status, and the possibilities of traveling back and forth – all deeply connected to social position. Migrating to Germany is open to male (so far) Mexicans who embody the cultural capital, the technical know-how, and the linguistic abilities (German and English). *Volkswagen de México* taps into and reproduces class-based and gender distinctions, opportunities, and possibilities.

### 6.2 Bonds

Otto Lindner, the former executive president of *Volkswagen de México*, describes vinculación as “strengthen[ing] the bonds between university and company.” But these bonds do more than just connect company and university. *Volkswagen de México* is described as the godfather (*padrino*) of Engineering in Automotive Design at UPAEP since the factory not only sponsors the department but also the students. In this relationship, Volkswagen is the benefactor and the protector, once again extending the arms of “The Volkswagen Family” beyond the factory grounds. When they speak about their relationship with the factory, students inhabit the “family trope,” which I have discussed in previous chapters. “Family” here means protection, care, and a sense of belonging. It is crafted through the sponsorship, the discount that Volkswagen gives students to learn German in one of its many language schools, and by the talks and professional advice offered by high-ranking German and Mexican male personnel. Ultimately, care and protection are signified by the promise of a job for all ‘godchildren’ who are attached to Volkswagen’s sponsorship. This promise reproduces the script and imagined collectivity represented by “We are Volkswagen.”

Although *Volkswagen de México* describes vinculación as a practice of Corporate Social Responsibility, it is also conceived as a consequence of the transformation of Volkswagen in
Mexico with the advent of NAFTA: From manufacturing car models for Mexico and Central America that were outdated in Europe and the United States to producing the latest models and technologies for the United States, Canada, and the rest of the world. In 2012, Thomas Karig, vice-president of Corporative and Strategic Relations of *Volkswagen de México*, declared that “For ten years the Puebla plant has had models that are only produced here, such as the New Beetle; it is reasonable to delegate to Mexico the development and engineering [of cars].”

Bonds extend beyond the factory and UPAEP. *Vinculación* agreements partake in relationships of exchange between the city and Volkswagen. Puebla continues supplying the labor necessary for designing cars, and *Volkswagen de México* will offer (some) jobs. *Vinculación* enables a sociality that connects the factory with universities and to a younger generation. Engineering in Automotive Design draws the Millennial Generation into the car economy – not so much as consumers but as future producers. In this light, the crafting of the future labor force continues cultivating the habitus and imaginary of the car economy. It continues engendering dreams, aspirations, and hopes not only in relation to the car economy but also in relation to global capitalism. This future labor force reproduces and enlarges the collectivity “Puebla is Volkswagen,” even spatially via migratory circuits between Mexico and Germany.

The *vinculación* agreement between *Volkswagen de México* and UPAEP reproduces the double-edge of the car economy. It entangles a wide range of possibilities and opportunities, belongings, and forms of care, to the rationale of lowering production costs. Labor is also made cheap by producing a surplus of workers that aspire to and craft themselves to work for *Volkswagen de México*.

The double-edge of the car economy signaled by *vinculación* is the reproduction of the shackles of economic dependency – at the local, regional, and national levels – on transnational
corporations, on the car economy, and on an economy based on exportation. This economy—and in particular global car production—has been made possible by NAFTA and the other eleven free trade agreements that Mexico has signed since 1994 with forty-four countries. As such, car manufacturing in Mexico is tied to the contingencies of ‘the market,’ and, at this particular historical moment, it is also haunted by the threats of the current U.S. president Donald Trump to pull U.S. car manufacturers out of Mexico and to impose a 35% tax on German manufacturers who produce their cars here (Taylor and Rinke 2017).

The promises and possibilities that are opened up are tied to keeping wages artificially low. Mexico’s official discourse regarding wage increases follows the neoclassical economic theory that suggests that, to increase wages, it is enough to propel investments without the interference of unions or labor policies (Covarrubias Valdenebro 2014 fn. 26). This assertion points to the circular logic that shapes global production. Transnational corporations continue investing in Mexico because of a cheap skilled labor force and free trade agreements.

Situating Mexico as a technology producer in the global chain of car manufacturing also aims to increase the number of cars manufactured there. By 2015, Mexico had overtaken Canada, and now produces more cars than any European country except Germany. Production has climbed from 1.2 million in 2007 to 3.4 million in 2015. Mexico’s current goal is to produce 5 million cars by 2020 (Piecyk, Mordue, and Yates 2016). To achieve this goal, in 2016 Audi opened a factory in Puebla, BMW is building a factory in San Luis Potosi and Mazda, and Toyota and Kia Motors have been manufacturing in Mexico since 2014. Although different, the aggressive push to transform Mexico into the main car manufacturer in the world is reminiscent of the aggressive industrialization project that began in 1962 and brought to the country eight multinational car manufacturers. The 2020 goal recalls that car factories have been the preferred
path of economic development in Latin America, as car production is a labor and capital intensive economic activity.

What these glossy numbers and projections do not convey is how car manufacturing unfolds on the ground. As I showed in this dissertation, using *Volkswagen de México* as an example, car manufacturing has, among other things, meant massive transfers of water. Water for industrial manufacturing has caused the desiccation of lakes, aquifers, wetlands, and springs. To construct the car factories, the government grants access to cheap land, supplied through dispossession involving legal and physical violence as well as terror or bought at artificially low prices from peasants. The most recent case of land dispossession (*ejidos*) and ruptured peasant economies—processes that I described in Chapters Two and Three—is tied to Audi Mexico and its new state-of-the-art factory in San José Chiapa, Puebla. Land was expropriated not only to build the factory but also to create a new city (*Ciudad Modelo*) around the factory, and a highway (Castillo 2014; Hernández 2015; Méndez 2015; Morales 2015). As with the arrival of Volkswagen in 1964, the arrival of AUDI also brought factions from Puebla’s oligarchy into conflict: not only *ejidos* were expropriated but also private property from an ‘old money family’ (Mastretta 2014).

Exploitations, inequalities, dependency on transnational corporations, and free trade agreements constitute economic relations and power relations (Wolf 1990). At the same time, the power that structures the car economy has also produced possibilities, opportunities, belongings, and forms of care. *Vinculación* reminds us of the ways in which relationships of domination, exploitation, and inequality are entangled with jobs, fellowships, and care. It is through this entanglement that the resilience and endurance of Volkswagen’s car economy continues to be constituted.
Within this complex field of power and economic relations, Carlos continues crafting his own future. Last I spoke with him, he was learning German at the Volkswagen language school to prepare for his studies in Germany. In planning for his final year, Carlos asked his parents to save the almost two thousand dollars per semester that they were not using for his tuition so the money could be used for his expenses in Germany. In the speech that he gave as the students’ representative when he received his scholarship, Carlos said the following: “I want to express my gratitude [to my university] for sharing its vision and collaborating with Volkswagen to create this wonderful opportunity by giving [students] the basis for achieving our objectives and for constructing our future.”

Although Carlos is grateful to Volkswagen de México and the university for enabling him to construct his own future, this future, is not contained by the state’s vision of locating Mexico as a technology producer in the global chain of car manufacturing, or by Volkswagen’s vision of Mexicans developing a future car for the “Mexican market.” Sitting in the Starbucks on Juárez Avenue in Puebla, I ask Carlos if he wants to work for Volkswagen de México once he is done with his studies. Carlos, smiling, shakes his head. “I want to work for Lamborghini,” he tells me and adds that his dream is to design luxurious sports cars outside of Mexico.
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